4 EDITION

EFFECTIVE CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Moving From Crisis to Opportunity



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Timothy L. Sellnow
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Effective Crisis Communication

Fourth Edition

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Brief Contents

Preface
Acknowledgments
PART I • THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION
- Chapter 1 • Defining Crisis Communication
- Chapter 2 • Understanding Crisis Communication Theory and Practice

PART II • THE LESSONS AND PRACTICAL APPLICATION
- Chapter 3 • Lessons on Effective Crisis Communication
- Chapter 4 • Applying the Lessons to Produce Effective Crisis Communication
- Chapter 5 • Lessons on Managing Crisis Uncertainty Effectively
- Chapter 6 • Applying the Lessons for Managing Crisis Uncertainty Effectively
- Chapter 7 • Lessons on Effective Crisis Leadership
- Chapter 8 • Applying the Lessons for Developing Effective Crisis Leadership

PART III • THE OPPORTUNITIES
- Chapter 9 • Learning Through Failure
- Chapter 10 • Risk Communication
- Chapter 11 • Responding to the Ethical Demands of Crisis
- Chapter 12 • Facilitating Renewal Through Effective Crisis Communication

References
Index
About the Authors

Detailed Contents

Preface
Acknowledgments
PART I • THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION
Chapter 1 • Defining Crisis Communication
A Definition of Crisis Communication
Surprise
Threat
Short Response Time
Expanding the Traditional Definition of Crisis
Disasters, Emergencies, Crisis, and Risk
Types of Crises
Intentional Crises
Unintentional Crises
The Significance of Crisis in a Global Environment
Understanding the Misconceptions Associated With Crises and Crisis Communication
Summary
Chapter 2 • Understanding Crisis Communication Theory and Practice
Media Theories and Crisis Communication
News Framing Theory
Focusing Events
Crisis News Diffusion
Exemplification Theory
Organizational Theories of Crisis Communication
Corporate Apologia
Image Repair Theory
Situational Crisis Communication Theory
Discourse of Renewal Theory
Crisis Communication Theories That Describe, Explain, and Prescribe
Understanding and Defining the Threat Bias in Crisis Communication
Summary
PART II • THE LESSONS AND PRACTICAL APPLICATION
Chapter 3 • Lessons on Effective Crisis Communication
Determining Your Goals
Partnering With Crisis Audiences
Understanding the Diversity of Your Audiences
Primary and Secondary Stakeholders Defined

Communicating With Underrepresented Groups During Crises
A Word on Partnerships and Listening
What Information Do Stakeholders Need Following a Crisis?
Communicate Early and Often With Both Internal and External Stakeholders
Identifying the Cause of the Crisis
Contacting Everyone Affected by the Crisis
Determining Current and Future Risks
Is Certain Communication Always the Best Approach?
Avoid Overreassuring Your Stakeholders
Tell Your Stakeholders How to Protect Themselves
Reducing and Intensifying Uncertainty Before, During, and After Organizational Crises
A Summary of Crisis Communication Research and Practice and Renewal
Social Media and Effective Crisis Communication
The Power of Positive Action
Summary
Chapter 4 • Applying the Lessons to Produce Effective Crisis Communication
Example 4.1. The Largest Environmental Crisis in United States History: BP and the United States Coast Guard Respond
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 4.2. A Plant Fire at Malden Mills
Crisis Preparation and Planning
Courageous Communication in the Wake of a Disaster
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 4.3. Long-Term Complexities in the Tainted Odwalla Apple Juice Crisis
Challenges for Multiple Stakeholders
Odwalla's Crisis Response
Impact on Stakeholders
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 4.4. What's in a Name?: Beef Products Incorporated Face "Pink Slime"
A Third Party Crisis Response
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 4.5. Rural Renewal After a Tornado in Greensburg, Kansas
Initial Framing of the Crisis

Consequences of a Bold Environmental Vision Following the Tornado
Community Response
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 4.6. A Costly YouTube Hoax for Domino's Pizza
Unusual Challenges for Domino's
Domino's Crisis Response
Summary
You Make the Call
Chapter 5 • Lessons on Managing Crisis Uncertainty Effectively
Defining Uncertainty
Unexpected Crises and Uncertainty
Nonroutine Crisis Events and Uncertainty
Threat Perception and Uncertainty
Short Response Time and Uncertainty
The Impact of Crisis-Induced Uncertainty on Stakeholders
Managing Communication Ambiguity Ethically During Crisis
Consistent Questions of Ambiguity
Training, Simulations, and Uncertainty
Belief Structures and Uncertainty
Summary
Chapter 6 • Applying the Lessons for Managing Crisis Uncertainty Effectively
Example 6.1. Tennessee Valley Authority and the Kingston Ash Slide
Missed Opportunities in Crisis Preparation and Planning
Tennessee Valley Authority's Response to an Uncertain Crisis
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 6.2. L'Aquila: A Case of Miscommunication
Communicating to the Public About L'Aquila's Immediate Risk
The Investigation
The Outcome
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 6.3. General Motors and Mary Barra
Honesty, Candor, and Openness
Communicate With Compassion, Concern, and Empathy
Process Approaches and Policy Development
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 6.4. King Car's Response to the 2008 Melamine Crisis

Reducing Crisis Uncertainty
A Guiding Vision for King Car's Crisis Communication
Initial Crisis Communication
The Recall
Critical Acclaim
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 6.5. Flint, Michigan, Water Contamination
Failure to Listen to Public Concerns
Multiple Agencies
Failure to Accept Uncertainty and Ambiguity
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 6.6. Fukushima Daiichi: Uncertainty Created by Three Interrelated Crisis Events
Summary
You Make the Call
Chapter 7 • Lessons on Effective Crisis Leadership
The Importance of Effective Leadership
Why Visibility Following a Crisis Is Important
Developing Networks of Support
Being Available, Open, and Honest
The Impact of Leadership on Renewal Following a Crisis
Ineffective Leadership During a Crisis
What Makes an Effective Crisis Leader?
Leadership Styles
Contingency Approach to Leadership
Transformational Leadership
Leadership Virtues
Managing Uncertainty, Responding, Resolving, and Learning From Crisis
Suggestions for the Leader as Spokesperson
Summary
Chapter 8 • Applying the Lessons for Developing Effective Crisis Leadership
Example 8.1. The Sweeping Impact of a Contaminated Food Ingredient: Peanut Corporation of America
Pervasiveness of the Product
PCA's Crisis Response
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 8.2. A Fire at Cole Hardwood
Crisis Planning and Preparation

Leading Instinctively After a Disaster
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 8.3. The Largest Food-Borne Illness Outbreak in History: Schwan's Sales Enterprises
A Guiding Philosophy
Schwan's Crisis Response
Learning From the Crisis
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 8.4. Freedom Industries and the West Virginia Drinking Water Contamination
A Delayed Response
Volunteer Voices
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 8.5. United Airlines: Failed Crisis Leadership
Summary
You Make the Call
Example 8.6. SeaWorld's Orca: A Symbol of Tragedy
Inevitable Questions
Blackfish: A Condemning Documentary
SeaWorld's Response
Summary
You Make the Call
PART III • THE OPPORTUNITIES
Chapter 9 • Learning Through Failure
Failing to Learn From Failure
Learning Through Failure
Vicarious Learning
Organizational Memory
Unlearning
Summary
Chapter 10 • Risk Communication
Distinguishing Between Risk and Crisis
Identifying Risk
Mindfulness
Analyzing Multiple Audiences
Convergence Theory and Risk Communication
Responsible Risk Communication
Significant Choice
Fantasy Messages
Summary

Chapter 11 • Responding to the Ethical Demands of Crisis
Ethics
Corporations as Moral Agents
Values
Values and Crisis
Responsibility and Accountability
Access to Information
Humanism and Care
The Role of Values in a Crisis Response
Summary
Chapter 12 • Facilitating Renewal Through Effective Crisis Communication
Considering the Opportunities Associated With Crisis
Theoretical Components of the Discourse of Renewal
Organizational Learning
Ethical Communication
Prospective Versus Retrospective Vision
Optimism
Engaging in Effective Organizational Rhetoric
Summary of the Discourse of Renewal
The Discourse of Renewal and Crisis Planning
Summary
References
Index
About the Authors

Preface

The fourth edition of *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving From Crisis to Opportunity* supports the central thesis that crisis communication is not solely about managing crisis-induced threat but also about creating the potential for opportunity, renewal, and growth through effective crisis communication. From a communication focus, crises are most often described as destructive, threatening, and negative events, without any redeeming value. Consequently, communication following a crisis is often defensive and negative. Organizations deny responsibility for the crisis, look for scapegoats to attribute responsibility to, minimize the extent or impact of the damage, take a rigid legalistic approach, or say nothing at all. These types of responses have resulted in a declining confidence in our public and private institutions. Much of the current crisis communication theory has effectively categorized strategies that organizations employ to preserve their images and reputations.

The approach to crisis communication described in this book is different in that it provides the reader with more options for responding to a crisis beyond managing the organization's image or reputation. This is certainly a mind-set shift. All crises carry a level of threat. However, we suggest that an organization experiencing a crisis also take the opportunity to learn from the event, communicate honestly and ethically, work to minimize harm to those most directly impacted by the crisis, and develop a prospective vision with which the organization can move forward. This approach suggests that organizations should enact strong and positive ethical core values and effective crisis communication principles to guide their crisis responses. If this approach seems radical and unconventional, it is. However, as you will see in this book, we have tested this approach through many different case studies, crisis types, and contexts, including international applications.

As you read the fourth edition of this book, you will notice that it is reorganized from previous editions. The book is still comprised of three sections. The first section of the book, Chapters 1 and 2, provide the conceptual foundation for the book. Chapter 1 defines crisis communication, and Chapter 2 examines current crisis communication theory. The second section of the book, Chapters 3 through 8, is comprised of lessons for managing crises, followed immediately by practical applications. For instance, Chapter 3 discusses lessons on effective communication practices during a crisis. Chapter 4 follows up with several cases for applying those lessons to a wide variety of crisis types. Chapter 5 delineates lessons on managing crisis uncertainty effectively. Chapter 6 examines many cases to test the reader's ability to apply the lessons on managing uncertainty across crisis contexts. Chapter 7 describes lessons on effective crisis leadership. Chapter 8 provides several case examples to consider each of the lessons and how they function during a crisis. Taking time with the lessons and the cases will

help the crisis communication researcher and practitioner analyze, consider, and evaluate theory and practice in these crisis communication contexts. The reader who spends some time answering the questions at the end of the cases will build a strong foundation for developing effective crisis communication skills.

The last section of the book, "The Opportunities," examines the role of organizational learning, risk communication, and ethical communication in creating opportunities following a crisis. These chapters provide suggestions for the reader to resist a threat bias in crisis communication and consider more mindfully the opportunities the crisis may produce. The last chapter of the book introduces our theory, the discourse of renewal, as an approach to effectively manage crises. Researchers can use this approach to test the viability of the theory across contexts and to assess the strengths and weaknesses of particular instances of crisis communication. Researchers and practitioners will be able to use the discourse of renewal to develop crisis messages and more fully consider risk and crisis communication policy decisions.

Theories help us understand and view the world around us in different ways. We view theory as a lens to help better understand the world around us. This book provides lessons and new perspectives for examining crises of all types. We hope that our suggestions for effective crisis communication help the reader expand and reconsider the way he or she views and communicates about crises. We also hope that the cases we describe in the upcoming chapters provoke thoughtful debate and discussion about how people perceive and communicate about these events. Finally, we hope this book provides the impetus for an expanded understanding about research, practice, and policy in crisis communication.

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Part I The Conceptual Foundation

[Chapter 1: Defining Crisis Communication]
[Chapter 2: Understanding Crisis Communication Theory and Practice]

1 Defining Crisis Communication

We live in a society continually affected by natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tsunamis, and forest fires, and by organizational crises, such as food-borne illnesses, corporate malfeasance, and terrorism. Regardless of where you live or the kind of work you do, many different types of crises have the potential to significantly disrupt your personal and work life. No community and no organization, public or private, is immune from crises.

At the writing of the fourth edition of this book, the need for understanding effective crisis communication practices and building those skills are in ever-increasing demand. In just over two years since the last edition, cyberattacks held computer data containing essential medical records for ransom in England, Scotland, and dozens of other countries, forcing some hospitals to temporarily halt medical treatment; Volkswagen created a scheme to falsify emission levels of its diesel vehicles, enraging its customers, regulatory agencies, and citizens concerned about the environment; Fox News fired popular program host, Bill O'Reilly, and the network's founder and former CEO, Roger Ailes, after multiple employees accused them individually of sexual harassment; Japanese supplier Takata recalled millions of airbags installed by numerous automakers, because the inflator parts can project dangerous shrapnel when activated; and a sexual assault scandal at Baylor University led to the firing of its football coach and the resignation of its president. This is not an exhaustive list but rather highlights —or lowlights—by organizations that experienced devastating crises recently. Beyond organizational crises, communities experienced natural disasters like the Oroville Dam spillway emergency that prompted the evacuation of nearly 200,000 residents of California; Hurricane Matthew that hit Haiti, Cuba, the Bahamas, Dominican Republic, and Jamaica and caused flooding and damage in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina; and the burst of 41 tornados in January of 2017 that caused as many deaths (20) in the Southeastern United States in one month as was seen in the entire United States during all of 2016 because of tornadoes. Check out www.disaster-report.com for an update on the current status of natural disasters around the world. We continue to experience devastating crises of all types and as a result, the current need for effective crisis communication understanding and skills continues to grow.

Because of the prevalence of crises, organizations like the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), local and state emergency management departments, and public health departments, along with government agencies, public relations firms, and corporations across industries, need professionals who have sound crisis communication skills. In short, crisis communication skills and knowledge are useful in any industry. However, because of the prevalence of crises, crisis communica-

tion skills are some of the most sought after by employers. Regardless of the type of work that you do, the knowledge and skills discussed in this book will enable you to communicate more effectively during a crisis.

Some might ask, "Who would want to work in a depressing field studying negative crises?" We answer by saying crises are not intrinsically negative forces in society. In fact, our proposition is that crises can actually lead to positive outcomes. We see crises as opportunities for learning and improvement. By their nature, crises are dangerous moments or turning points in an organization's life cycle; nevertheless, crises provide opportunities with the potential to leave the organization stronger in some ways than it was before the crisis.

If we do not study crisis communication, organizations and the many people associated with them are likely to be stunned, frightened, and depressed when enveloped by a crisis. In fact, some organizations communicate so poorly in the wake of a crisis that they are forever weakened, having lost the confidence of both their own members and the public.

This book presents strategies accumulated over many years of research as well as our experience as organizational consultants, emphasizing the opportunities in a crisis rather than the calamities of these events. The chapters illustrate key communication lessons to create renewal, growth, and opportunity following a crisis. At the crux of our argument is the contention that effective communication skills are essential to creating positive, renewing opportunities at these turning points.

The new edition of this book is organized into three parts designed to increase the reader's understanding and skills in crisis communication. Part I contains two chapters that develop the conceptual understanding of effective crisis communication. Chapter 1 directs the reader to consider expanded definitions of crisis communication and explains the many types of crises that one may experience. Chapter 2 introduces the reader to key research and theories in crisis communication. This chapter serves as a tool for building the reader's vocabulary for describing, explaining, and understanding crisis communication. Part II moves from the conceptual to the practical. In this section, the reader is presented with practical lessons, based on empirical research, for communicating effectively, managing uncertainty, and leading during a crisis. After each chapter of lessons, the reader is presented with an opportunity to apply those lessons to crisis case studies in the next chapter. For instance, Chapter 3 focuses on effective crisis communication. This chapter contains 10 lessons for effectively communicating during a crisis. Chapter 4 is comprised of six current cases to be assessed for their effective crisis communication practices. In this chapter, the reader is able to build his or her skills by applying the lessons of effective crisis communication to each case. Chapter 5 contains 10 lessons for managing uncertainty during a crisis. Every crisis carries with it some level of uncertainty. Chapter 5 explains how to communicate

effectively under crisis-induced uncertainty. Chapter 6 introduces six cases the reader can use to test their skills at communicating under high levels of uncertainty. Chapter 7 delineates 10 leadership lessons for effective crisis communication. Chapter 8 consists of six cases designed to test the reader's ability to assess the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the leader's crisis communication. In each of the case chapters, the reader is asked to make the call regarding the effectiveness of the crisis response.

Parts I and II thus provide the conceptual understanding and skill development for effective crisis communication practices. Part III contains chapters on learning through failure, risk communication, communication ethics, and a final chapter on inspiring renewal following a crisis. This third part of the book describes several content areas that every crisis communicator should consider as opportunities in crisis communication. In Chapter 9, we explain how organizations can improve their crisis preparation and response capacity by learning through their failures. In Chapter 10, we demonstrate how effective risk communication provides crisis communicators opportunities to prevent future crises. Chapter 11 examines the ethical implications of crisis and the opportunities provided by strong ethical stances and communication. Chapter 12 proposes a theory of effective crisis communication we call the *Discourse of Renewal*. We provide a description of this theory along with its applications to crisis communication. Throughout the book, we turn to a small group of landmark cases to illustrate the various aspects being discussed.

A Definition of Crisis Communication

Initially, we need to clarify what we mean by *crisis*. In daily conversation, the word is used quite casually. As a simple experiment, listen to the people around you for a day or two. Most likely, you will hear friends, fellow employees, or fellow students describe routine problems they are facing—fender benders, forgotten appointments, disgruntled mothers-in-law, bad hair days, or losing records of favorite university football teams—as crises. All are bad experiences; however, they are not, by our definition, crises. Similarly, with some degree of regularity, organizations face events, such as unexpectedly low sales or the defection of key employees. Again, these are difficult times for organizations, but they are not necessarily crises. *Crises are unique moments in the history of organizations.*

In a classic study, Hermann (1963) identified three characteristics separating crises from other unpleasant occurrences:

1. Surprise
2. Threat
3. Short response time

A troubling event cannot reach the level of crisis without coming as a surprise, posing a serious level of threat, and forcing a short response time. Let's take a moment to define Hermann's characteristics of crisis.

Surprise

Even naturally occurring events, such as floods, earthquakes, and forest fires, do not escalate to the level of crisis unless they come at a time or a level of intensity beyond the expectations of government officials and residents. For example, weather conditions combined in such a way that the 2013 tornadoes that hit Moore, Oklahoma, introduced a high degree of surprise to the situation. Hundreds of homes were lost, 24 people died, and the city was declared a disaster area.

Similarly, in 2011, a FedEx customer posted a YouTube video (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpVFC7bMtY0 or search FedEx delivery goes terribly wrong) of the carrier throwing his computer monitor over a high gate and into his yard. The video was viewed millions of times. At that moment, this event was certainly a surprise and a crisis for FedEx. FedEx quickly responded to the surprise of the crisis (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ESU_PcqI38 or search FedEx response to customer video) by communicating with its customers and the general public about the crisis. Ultimately, this crisis threatened the long-standing values of FedEx and the viability of its service for customers.

Threat

All crises create threatening circumstances that reach beyond the typical problems organizations face. The threat of a crisis can affect the organization's financial security, its customers, residents living near a production facility, and others. For example, when a BP oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 and spilled millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf, the crisis threat was widespread. The considerable amount of oil on the water's surface was devastating to the fishing industry in the area. Birds and other sea animals were also impacted by the spill, thereby adding levels of threat to the ecosystem of the region. To begin to learn about the effects of the oil spill, BP initially contributed $500 million through a Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative to study the short- and long-term effects of the oil spill on the environment and marine life. One would expect the response and recovery efforts, along with a complete understanding of the effects of the oil spill on the Gulf of Mexico, to continue for many years.

Oil spills occur with some regularity worldwide. They are usually contained quickly, causing little long-term damage. Oil spills seldom reach the crisis level. In BP's case, however, the amount of oil spilled created a heightened threat level. Ultimately, the crisis became the largest environmental disaster in U.S. history.

Short Response Time

The threatening nature of crises means that they must be addressed quickly. BP was criticized initially for not communicating and responding more quickly to the crisis. In addition, the company was criticized for not having clear risk and crisis communication provisions in place for a disaster of this magnitude. As a result, after the explosion, the crisis appeared to be beyond BP's control as oil rapidly gushed into the water. Tony Hayward, the CEO of BP at the time of the crisis, was widely criticized for several communication missteps including minimizing the scope and intensity of the crisis and for lacking compassion and empathy in his initial post-crisis responses. Organizations must provide effective communication immediately following the crisis. This can be difficult because of the inherent uncertainty of crisis events and because little is often known about the cause of the crisis. However, organizations have a short window to take control of the crisis and set the tone for the response and recovery efforts.

As you can see from these examples, one of the most frustrating and distressing aspects of crisis is the persistent urgency of the situation. This urgency is compounded by the fact that a crisis comes as a surprise and introduces extreme threat into a situation.

Expanding the Traditional Definition of Crisis

In this book, we discuss organizational crises of many types, ranging from those caused by industrial accidents to natural disasters. To account for all these types, we offer the following description as a working definition of organizational crisis:

> An organizational crisis is a specific, *unexpected*, and *nonroutine* event or series of events that create high levels of *uncertainty* and simultaneously present an organization with both *opportunities* for and *threats* to its *high-priority goals*.

As we have established, much of the intensity of a crisis comes with some degree of surprise. Even in cases where there are clear warning signs, most people are still surprised when a crisis actually occurs. Thus, crises are almost always unexpected events. Because they exceed any planning expectations, they cannot be managed with routine procedures. Once an organization abandons its routine procedures, its leadership is faced with managing this uncertainty by emphasizing either opportunities for growth or renewal or threat to the organization's image or reputation in their crisis communication. See Table 1.1 for a description of each component in our working definition.

TABLE 1.1 ■ Key Components of a Working Definition of Organizational Crisis

Unexpected	An event comes as a surprise. This surprise may be something for which the organization could not have anticipated or planned. It could also result from conditions that exceed even the most aggressive crisis management plans.
Nonroutine	Problems occur daily in nearly all organizations. To account for these problems, organizations engage in routine procedures. Crises are events that cannot be managed by routine procedures. Instead, crises require unique and often extreme measures.
Produces uncertainty	Because they are unexpected and beyond the routine actions of organizations, crises produce tremendous uncertainty. Organizations cannot be aware of all causes and ultimate effects of crises without some degree of investigation. Efforts to reduce uncertainty may continue for months or even years after a crisis.
Creates opportunities	Crises create opportunities that may not be available during normal business opportunities. Crises create opportunities to learn, make strategic changes, grow, or develop new competitive advantages.
Threat to image, reputation, or high-priority goals	Crises can produce an intense level of threat to the organization and its affiliates. This threat is often described as damage to the image or reputation of an organization. However, crises can also be threatening enough to permanently destroy an organization.

Disasters, Emergencies, Crisis, and Risk

The term *crisis* most often relates to organizations experiencing high consequence events. However, communities often experience disasters like tornadoes and hurricanes. Similarly, on a much smaller scale compared to crises and disasters, organizations or communities might experience an emergency, which is a small-scale crisis that is more contained and controlled than crises or disasters. For the purposes of our discussions in this book, an evacuation of a building because of a gas leak is an emergency. Now, there are important communication protocols for handling emergencies; however, they are outside the scope of this book. Conversely, a gas explosion at an organization is a crisis. The type of response necessary to deal with this type of crisis is directly within the scope of this book. Similarly, as you will see in the case chapters, the ideas discussed in this book are useful for understanding organizational and community responses to a wide range of disasters, like terrorism, natural disasters, and environmental disasters.

Furthermore, note that the foregoing definition does not mention risk. We separate crisis and risk, because we believe that, while risk is a natural part of life, crisis can often be avoided. Naturally, some people live with more risk in their lives than others. For example, some people choose to live next to oil refineries, on hurricane-prone coasts, or in areas susceptible to mudslides or forest fires. Please understand, however, that crisis and risk are closely connected, as poor risk communication can cause a crisis. In Chapter 10, we talk more about the opportunities associated with effective risk communication. What follows is a discussion of various crisis types.

Types of Crises

Now, with that definition of organizational crisis in mind, think about some of the events that would qualify as a crisis. Have you been in a crisis situation either directly or indirectly? You may not have faced a Fortune 500 company bankruptcy, but you may have witnessed a flood, an organizational leader's dishonesty, a food-borne illness outbreak at a national restaurant chain, a catastrophic industrial fire, or the wide-reaching impacts of a terrorist event. All these incidents can be described as crisis situations.

Crisis communication researchers develop classification systems of crisis types to assist them in their crisis planning and in so doing, reduce the uncertainty when crises occur. The simplest and possibly the most useful distinction to make in crisis types is to divide them into two categories: intentionally caused crises and crises caused by natural, uncontrollable factors. When crisis planners attempt to think the unthinkable regarding all the potential crises they could face, the list is not only endless, but it is also unique to the organization. We do not pretend to list every possible type of crisis that could be caused by intentional or unintentional acts. Rather, we provide a list of categories into which most crises fall.

Intentional Crises

We identify seven general categories for crises that are initiated by intentional acts designed to harm an organization:

1. Terrorism
2. Sabotage
3. Workplace violence
4. Poor employee relationships
5. Poor risk management
6. Hostile takeovers
7. Unethical leadership

Since the distressing events that occurred on September 11, 2001, *terrorism* tops the list of the most urgent intentional causes of crisis. Organizations of all types must now be aware of their vulnerability to terrorist acts that can disrupt both the organization and the nation as a whole.

Organizations are also vulnerable to *sabotage*, which involves the intentional damaging of a product or the working capacity of the organization by someone inside the organization. Typically, sabotage is done for revenge or for some benefit, such as economic gain. Similarly, *workplace violence* has become all too common in the United States. Distressed over their perceived mistreatment by an organization, employees or former employees undertake violent acts. Sadly, this form of violence has become more frequent even on college campuses. The result is often multiple injuries, deaths, and disruption of the organization and its workforce.

Wide-scale crises can also result from *poor employee relationships*. If an organization cannot develop positive relationships between management and its workers, trouble is likely to occur. For example, an organization could develop a reputation of having poor working conditions. If these conditions persist, the organization is likely to have difficulty both retaining and recruiting employees. Without enough qualified employees, an organization cannot continue to function.

Another possibility is that, when unionized employees become very frustrated with their working conditions, they may choose to take some action, such as striking. In most cases, employee strikes adversely affect an organization's financial stability. We realize that poor employee relationships are not responsible for all strikes or employee turnover problems. We are convinced, however, that when turnover and strikes lead to crisis situations, the relationships between management and employees are often controversial.

If organizations are guilty of *poor risk management*, the outcomes can be disastrous for consumers, employees, or both. For example, a beef processing plant in a Midwestern city failed to adequately maintain its sewer system, creating a dangerous public health hazard. The sewer system overflowed, sending foul-smelling cattle waste and remnants from the slaughter process directly into a river flowing through the community of nearly 100,000 people. The ultimate consequence of this poor risk management was heavy fines that forced the plant to close.

Hostile takeovers are still a major threat to organizations. Simply put, hostile takeovers occur when the majority of an organization's stock is purchased by a rival organization. The result can be an overthrow of the current leadership and the dismantling of the organization. Hundreds or thousands of employees can find themselves unemployed because of actions that have taken place completely outside their workplace. Federal regulations address some of the issues related to hostile takeovers, but such aggressive assaults on organizations still exist.

The broadest and most inclusive subcategory of intentional crises is *unethical leadership*. An extensive review of more than 6,000 newsworthy organizational crisis events reported annually by the Institute for Crisis Management found that management was in some way responsible for the majority of them. Worse, many of these crises were caused by criminal acts of managers (Millar & Irvine, 1996). We dedicate Chapter 11 of this book to ethics. At this point, we want to emphasize that unethical behavior can and often is the ultimate cause of a crisis situation. When an organization's leadership knowingly puts its workers, consumers, investors, or the surrounding community at risk without being honest about that risk, two events are likely to occur. First, a breakdown in the system occurs, which often results in a crisis. Second, when the public learns of the organizational leadership's dishonesty, it is likely to be unforgiving. Thus, the road to recovery is likely to be much longer for dishonest leaders than it is for honest leaders.

Unintentional Crises

Clearly, not all crises are caused by the intentional acts of individuals with questionable motives. Rather, many are simply unforeseeable or unavoidable. In this section, we describe five types of unintentional crises:

1. Natural disasters
2. Disease outbreaks
3. Unforeseeable technical interactions
4. Product failure
5. Downturns in the economy

Like us all, organizations are vulnerable to *natural disasters*. Tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and earthquakes have the potential to destroy organizations' and industries' physical plants and entire communities. Although these events are largely unpredictable, some steps can be taken to reduce their impact on an organization. For example, building a nuclear reactor on or near an existing earthquake fault line would be unwise. Similarly, locating an organization in an area that is uncommonly susceptible to floods or tropical storms is indefensible. The earthquake in Haiti was much more damaging because of poor building practices. In short, organizations must take into account possible threats of natural disasters before they invest in their facilities. A natural disaster can be made much worse because of decisions made by organizations. Despite this caution, natural disasters are unavoidable as potential crises.

Disease outbreaks are an inevitable form of crisis. Some of these occur naturally. For example, the H1N1 virus caused worldwide alarm in 2009. Other crises, such as food-borne illness, occur because of organizational failure. For example, Schwan's Sales Enterprises discovered that its ice cream, distributed nationally, was contaminated with salmonella. Thousands of consumers became ill. Schwan's successful crisis recovery was based largely on the fact that the company responded quickly with a recall in an effort to limit the number of illnesses caused by the tainted product. Product failures at some level are nearly impossible to prevent. The severity and frequency of these failures, however, can be reduced significantly with good crisis planning.

Many of the malfunctions that lead to crises are the result of *unforeseeable technical interactions*. In his classic text, *Normal Accidents,* Charles Perrow (1999) describes dozens of examples of organizations whose monitoring and safety equipment became inaccurate and inoperable because of a series of seemingly unrelated errors or equipment failures. For example, he describes how a commercial aircraft was forced to crash-land after a coffeemaker shorted out, causing an electrical fire in a series of wires and disabling other safety equipment and vital control systems. In this case, the pilots and maintenance crew were following all the prescribed procedures. The coffeemaker was

wired appropriately. The crisis resulted from an almost unimaginable sequence of events piling on top of one another.

Product recalls are rather commonplace. Organizations discover unintended risks or flaws in a product, issue a recall, repair or replace the product or refund the purchase price, and move forward. Americans are so used to recalls based on *product failure* that many consumers weigh the inconvenience of having a product repaired or replaced against the risk posed by a flawed product. In many cases, consumers do not even respond to the recall. Some, however, reach crisis level. Organizations like Safe Kids Worldwide (http://www.safekids.org) monitor and list product recalls of all types for parents. By checking websites like this, one can see the varied and numerous product recalls that affect organizations and children across the world. For this reason, product recalls are one of the more frequent crisis types.

Last, organizations of nearly every kind are subject to crises caused by *downturns in the economy*. Even organizations that are ethical, thoughtful in their planning, and strict in their maintenance of safety regulations can be victims of economic crises. If consumers cannot afford an organization's products, there is little opportunity to resolve the situation with better communication. Downsizing and plant closings are often the result of economic downturns. From 2008 through 2010, the United States experienced one of the worst financial downturns in the economy since the Great Depression. The crisis, caused by increased risk taken by the banking industry and the collapse of the housing market, led to a complete collapse of our financial system. Businesses large and small had no access to credit and as a result, several large banks, such as Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch & Co., Washington Mutual, and Wachovia Corporation, went bankrupt or were taken over by other companies. In addition, companies like General Motors (GM) and Chrysler also declared bankruptcy, because of a lack of access to credit and the downturn in the economy. Economic downturns can create unexpected crises that have consequences that are far-reaching beyond the organizations that are responsible for creating the problems.

The Significance of Crisis in a Global Environment

Organizational crises are a consistent part of our existence. We cannot prevent them and as consumers, we cannot avoid them. Worse, crises are becoming more prevalent. Perrow (1999) explains that, as technology continues to advance and as our population continues to grow, we are increasingly exposed to and affected by crises that we could not have imagined 20 or 30 years ago.

As consumers, we are also dependent on more organizations than ever before. Twenty-five years ago, the Internet was a concept, cable television was considered a luxury, satellite television was in its infancy, and cell phones were nearly the size of chainsaws. Now, these technologies and the organizations that support them are central features in our daily lives. As we become more and more dependent on the services of an increasing number of organizations and technologies, our exposure to potential crises naturally increases.

In addition, as we move closer to a truly global society, the incidents on one continent can create a crisis an ocean away. Think of the impact that the most recent economic downturn had on the global economy. Excessive risk taking in one economy can create a global recession. Another example of our global society is our food system. As we mentioned earlier, the 2008 crisis that began in China had severe effects for many infants and young children across the world who drank imported milk products tainted with artificially inflated levels of the protein supplement melamine. This crisis resulted in many countries banning, recalling, or creating more elaborate testing measures for any milk products produced in China. As our world becomes more complex, interconnected, centralized, and efficient, the frequency and forms of crises will steadily increase. Understanding how to effectively engage in crisis communication, then, is a skill ever increasing in value. To be effective, one must be able to recognize and resist the varied misconceptions associated with effective crisis communication.

Understanding the Misconceptions Associated With Crises and Crisis Communication

Before we move on to presenting key theories in crisis communication, we want the reader to consider 10 misconceptions that people have about crises and crisis communication. Our misconceptions relate not only to how we define and understand crisis but also how we should communicate during a crisis. For this reason, this understanding is an important transition to our next chapter, which addresses theories of crisis communication. More important, our misconceptions about defining crisis and crisis communication practice often leads to ineffective and maladaptive crisis communication in practice. To be an effective crisis communicator means to resist these misconceptions. The preponderance of miscues and ineffective responses to crisis communication suggest that leaders and crisis communicators have some misconceptions about communication and crisis. What follows are 10 common misconceptions of crisis and crisis communication and descriptions of how correcting those misconceptions can lead to more productive and effective crisis responses (see Table 1.2).

TABLE 1.2 ■ Misconceptions of Crisis Communication

1. Crises build character.
2. Crises do not have any positive value.
3. Crisis communication is about determining responsibility and blame.
4. Crisis communication is solely about getting information out to stakeholders.
5. Crisis communication involves taking a rigid and defensive stance.
6. Crisis communication is about enacting elaborate prefabricated crisis plans.
7. Crisis communication is about over-reassuring the public about the impact of the crisis to avoid panic.
8. Crisis communication is about communicating only when new information is available.
9. Crisis communication is primarily about managing the image or reputation of an organization.
10. Crisis communication involves spinning the facts surrounding the crisis.

First, a common misconception is that going through a crisis helps an organization build its character. We believe that crises do not build character but expose the established character and values of organizations through their communication. In fact, a crisis is one of the only times an organization's stakeholders can view the values of an organization in action. For instance, it was not until the now legendary crisis at Enron that stakeholders were able to see firsthand the greed and unethical business practices inherent to the organization's culture, even though these practices had been going on for some time. Similarly, Aaron Feuerstein's crisis communication following his plant fire in 1995 illustrated the care and value he had established over time for his workers

and the community in which he operated. Both cases are discussed extensively throughout the book and suggest that crises serve as an opportunity to expose the current values inherent to an organization.

A second misconception about crises is that they are inherently negative events. As this book suggests, crises can present both threat and opportunity if viewed mindfully. Although threat often becomes the most salient feature of crisis events, we contend that crises should be viewed mindfully as dangerous opportunities, as discussed in our first chapter. For instance, the Greensburg, Kansas, case, discussed in Chapter 4, illustrates that crisis ultimately created an opportunity to save a town that was slowly in decline already. The food-borne illness crises for Schwan's and Odwalla, discussed in Chapters 4 and 8, allowed the companies to update their pasteurization processes and create safer food processing systems.

The third misconception about crisis is that resolution to a crisis solely involves retrospectively determining fault, assigning blame, and investigating what happened. Crisis leadership and effective crisis communication involves creating a vision for moving beyond the crisis, learning, and creating meaning. As you read the case chapter of this book, pay special attention to how the most effective leaders are able to develop a prospective vision during a crisis. Effective crisis communicators should not get mired in the investigation processes of a crisis. Pay special attention to the industrial fires of Cole Hardwood and Malden Mills, discussed in Chapters 4 and 8, as excellent examples of how leaders can resist the misconception that crisis communication is about determining blame and responsibility. In both cases, insurance companies and other agencies determined the causes of those fires. However, the leaders of both companies, Milt Cole and Aaron Feuerstein, focused on setting a vision for moving their companies beyond the crises.

A fourth misconception about crisis communication is that it is inherently about providing scripted messages designed in advance. We find that crisis communicators would do well to devote more attention to listening to and adapting messages for their stakeholders. Recognizing and responding to stakeholder concerns is far more important than producing prefabricated messages based on what the organization feels its stakeholders need to hear. Clearly, organizations can work with stakeholders to consider risks before a crisis and develop a crisis needs assessment of types of messages and preferred channels to be most effective. However, crises are dynamic and by definition, a surprise to most or all the people impacted by the event. Consider the 2008 collapse of the United States' financial institutions. Even with strong economic models and countless organizations in the financial industry, almost no one predicted the collapse of the housing market and subsequent credit crisis. This example reveals that effective crisis communicators listen to the unique needs of those impacted by these surprising events to comprise their messages. The best crisis messages in this book come from leaders who responded to a crisis authentically based on laudable values

and what they believed was in the best interests of their stakeholders. In each case, they met regularly with stakeholders to hear their concerns.

Our fifth misconception is that organizations and social systems need to become more rule-based and rigid in their organizational structure following a crisis. We believe that the more flexible and agile an organization or system is, the more it is able to respond to the uncertain, complex, and ever-changing demands of the crisis. Effective crisis communicators need to change accordingly and follow the dynamic nature of a crisis. Organizations would do well to take some action during a crisis to make sense of the situation. More often than not, organizations freeze and fail to act, often making the crisis worse. Organizations that embrace the situation and the uncertainty and take action to reduce uncertainty are more effective crisis communicators. Through a series of errors, a spokesperson in L'Aquila, Italy, miscommunicated the earthquake risk to a worried community. When a serious earthquake occurred, the residents felt betrayed. Several scientists were sentenced to prison for their role in assessing the L'Aquila community's earthquake risk. This failure to account for uncertainty created a prolonged crisis in Italy. The L'Aquila case is discussed in detail later in the book.

Misconception six is that having a crisis plan in place is the best preparation for a crisis. Although crisis plans can be helpful in preparing for a crisis, the best predictor of effective crisis management is strong, positive stakeholder relationships. As you read the cases in this book, pay special attention to how many effective organizations relied on stakeholders to support them during a crisis. For this reason, organizations looking to prepare for crises should work with their stakeholders to establish strong, positive relationships with them. We recommend that organizations work through problems and concerns before a crisis happens. Organizations that spend time establishing these relationships are better able to respond to the needs of these groups following a crisis.

Over-reassuring stakeholder safety regarding the impact of a crisis is the seventh common misconception of effective crisis communicators. Effective crisis communicators do not over-reassure their publics but provide information to their stakeholders to help protect themselves. In Chapter 5, we discuss this type of communication as self-efficacy. The more you can do as a crisis communicator to help protect your stakeholders, the better. Over-reassuring stakeholders about the outcome of a crisis is sure to kill the credibility of any spokesperson.

The eighth misconception about crisis communication is to say *no comment* or to stonewall. Effective crisis communicators meet regularly with their stakeholders and the media to answer questions, remain open and accessible, and keep everyone updated with information about the crisis. Organizations are typically caught so off guard following a crisis that they do not know what to say. In this case, we suggest that they tell people what they know, tell them what they do not know, and tell them what they are going to do to collect information about the crisis.

Misconception nine is to focus more on the organization's image and less on solutions to the crisis. Ineffective crisis communicators try to control their images, scapegoat other parties, and absolve themselves from blame. Once a crisis occurs, there is not much that can be done to save or repair an image. Rather, effective crisis communicators focus on finding solutions to the crisis and lessen the impact on those most impacted by the crisis. We contend that it is impossible to control the image or reputation of a company. Multiple events and perspectives by many different stakeholders comprise the overall image or reputation of a company. Ultimately, we argue that organizations should control what they can, which is correcting the problem and learning from the crisis.

The final misconception is that spin is a viable option in effective crisis communication. Spin only makes the crisis worse and makes the crisis communicator look unethical and irresponsible once the truth comes out. Be wary of any advice to use spin as a strategy in crisis communication. Organizations should be wary of those who suggest trying to spin the information surrounding a crisis to obscure responsibility. Organizations that resist this strategy are going to be more effective in their crisis communication.

Summary

This chapter provided an expanded definition of crisis, explained different crisis types, and delineated key misconceptions associated with the understanding and practice of crisis communication. The next part of this book examines key theories of crisis communication. These theories provide both a vocabulary for understanding crisis communication along with ways to describe, explain, and prescribe the practice of crisis communication. Let's now examine how different theories help us understand and practice crisis communication.

2 Understanding Crisis Communication Theory and Practice

To define and better understand crises of all types, researchers have developed theories to understand and manage these events. Crises are studied by a wide variety of disciplines, including psychology (Morgan, Fischhoff, Bostrom, & Atman, 2002; Slovic, 1987), sociology (Chess, 2001; Clarke & Chess, 2008; Mileti & Peek, 2000; Mileti & Sorensen, 1990; Quarantelli, 1988), business (Mitroff, 2005; Mitroff & Anagnos, 2001; Weick, 1988; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007), mathematics and physics (Bak, 1996; Lorenz, 1993; Mandelbrot, 1977), and political science (Birkland, 2006; Comfort, Sungu, Johnson, & Dunn, 2001; Ramo, 2009) among others. In addition, there are a number of practitioners who have written books about crisis communication (Reynolds, 2002; Witt & Morgan, 2002). James Lee Witt, former director of FEMA from 1993 to 2001, provides clear advice about effective crisis communication through his experiences managing major natural disasters. Barbara Reynolds provides a guide for crisis and emergency risk communication based on her considerable experience communicating about public health outbreaks around the world. Each of these disciplines and practitioners has contributed greatly to defining and better understanding how to manage crises (See Table 2.1).

Psychology, for instance, provides the theoretical background on mental model approaches to crisis communication and the social amplification of risk and crisis communication. These theories help us better understand how people cognitively perceive and ultimately respond to risk and crisis situations. Sociology provides theories on how to conduct community evacuations during all types of disasters and how communities respond to these disasters. The field of business examines sensemaking processes of leadership before, during, and after a crisis; the role of organizational learning in response to crisis; as well as organizational structures that exemplify a crisis-prepared or crisis-prone organization. Mathematics and physics produced chaos and complexity theories that have been used widely in the communication discipline as metaphors for the disruption and self-organization produced by crisis events (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008; Murphy, 1996; Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002). Political science provides theories, such as Ramo's (2009) deep security theory, that build on complexity and network theories for policymakers to prepare and respond to crises, such as terrorism. For full discussions of the interdisciplinary approach to crisis communication and the theoretical approaches associated with them, take a look at one of the recent handbooks on risk and crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Heath & O'Hair, 2009; Pearson, Roux-Dufort, & Clair, 2007). You will find that many of the lessons described in the upcoming chapters are grounded in the interdisciplinary research described above. However, the communication discipline has produced consid-

erable research on crisis communication. What follows is a discussion of the several important theories of crisis communication. The first section examines the important role media theories provide for contributing to the understanding of crisis communication.

TABLE 2.1 ■ Academic Disciplines Contributing to Understanding of Risk and Crisis Communication

Discipline	Theory Contribution
Psychology	Mental models approach to risk and crisis communication Social amplification of risk and crisis perceptions
Sociology	Disaster evacuation theory Social response to disasters Social and institutional networks during disasters
Business	Organizational sensemaking theory Organizational learning theory High reliability organizational theory
Mathematics and physics	Chaos theory Complexity theory Sandpile/Self-organized criticality theory
Political science	Policy change theory and catastrophic disasters Deep security theory

Media Theories and Crisis Communication

Considerable theory building in crisis communication has focused on the role of media in the life cycle of a crisis. In some cases, media coverage can amplify the public's fear beyond what is reasonable (Pidgeon, Kasperson, & Slovic, 2003). Conversely, the media often moves beyond "environmental surveillance" to the point of "community building" to assist with the crisis recovery period (Wilkins, 1989, p. 33). In either case, the media is a prominent player, making a substantial impact during crises. For this reason, Seeger (2006) prioritizes forming partnerships with the media as a best practice of crisis communication. In this section, we review three theories that have been adapted through considerable research to explain the role the media plays during crises. These theoretical perspectives include news framing, focusing events, and crisis news diffusion, and exemplification (See Table 2.2).

News Framing Theory

At the heart of news framing theory is the fact that "reporters and editors routinely choose among various approaches to the presentation of news stories" (Hook & Pu, 2006, p. 169). They approach selected results in a pattern of coverage that can frame a topic positively or negatively. The controversy inherent in many crises often intensifies and polarizes the framing process. For example, an organization may seek to frame a crisis as an aberration or as unavoidable. Conversely, the media may frame the same crisis as having manifested from a lack of responsible caution on the part of the organization. This type of polarity in framing crises is not unusual.

The news framing process can have a profound impact on how readers and viewers perceive a crisis. For this reason, Holladay (2010) argues, "it is imperative that organizations participate in this framing process" (p. 161). If organizations remain passive in the framing process, they make themselves completely vulnerable to their adversaries who will likely strive to tip the media coverage of the crisis negatively. For example, a metropolitan hospital recently responded to a budget shortfall by laying off a large number of nurses. Area media reported on the layoffs, framing the budget issues as having been caused by administrative mismanagement. Worse, the stories often featured laid-off nurses with young children in tears over their impending financial hardship. Meanwhile, another hospital in the community offered to hire some of the nurses at comparable wages. The financially struggling hospital remained silent throughout the crisis. The hospital never fully recovered from the crisis and was eventually sold to another health management company. Had the hospital offered a competing explanation or frame for needing to lay off employees, the outcome might have been very different.

As the hospital example reveals, the framing process influences the public's perception of the organizations afflicted with the crisis. If the crisis is framed in a way that reflects negatively on an organization, that organization's ability to recover from the crisis is impaired or delayed. Hence, news framing theory advocates that organizations take an active role in the framing process.

TABLE 2.2 ■ Media Theories Contributing to the Understanding of Crisis Communication

Theory	Characteristics
News Framing	Emphasizes the degree to which the crisis is framed positively or negatively Focuses on news reporting Features messages by both the media and organizations (often contrasting) designed to frame the crisis
Focusing Events	Emphasizes policy decisions made in response to crisis events Focuses on policy debates that are played out publicly Features determining blame, likelihood of similar crises in the future, and lessons learned
News Diffusion	Emphasizes the distribution of information in response to crises Focuses on the speed and accuracy of messages shared Features the diverse means through which people receive information and the resilience of those sources during crises
Exemplification	Emphasizes the way audiences assess portrayals, such as risks to their safety and health, including the apprehensions they feel that lead to risk avoidance or to taking self-protective actions Focuses on exemplars—brief, simple, and memorable messages, such as pictures, phrases, or emotional examples, that evoke a strong audience response, either positive or negative Features messages of all kinds that include exemplars (e.g., news stories, photographs, Internet memes, public speeches, news conferences, etc.)

Focusing Events

Focusing event theory is an extension of agenda setting theory. *Agenda setting* refers to the way the media determines the importance of various news stories or political issues. The higher a story ranks on the media's agenda, the more attention or coverage it receives. Crises become focusing events when they are high on the media's agenda and the discussion moves from reporting on the cause and impact of the crisis to the reconsideration of existing policies or the consideration of new policies for preventing similar crises in the future.

Wood (2006) explains that focusing events include four consistent attributes. First, like all crises, they occur suddenly. Second, they are rare. Third, they garner large-scale attention. Finally, both the public and policymakers simultaneously prioritize them. Fishman (1999) argues that the combination of "a dramatic news event, and the media's coverage of that event creates an urgency to take action" (p. 353). That action takes the form of policy debates and recommendations for revising current policies or developing new policies. For example, the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in the village of Sandy Hook in Newtown, Connecticut, inspired considerable debate over gun laws. Although no meaningful change occurred on the national level, many communities revised existing policies regarding firearms and schools after the Sandy Hook crisis.

Policy debates stemming from focusing events are typically based on three topics: blame, normalcy, and learning. Questions of blame ask whether or not the crisis was caused by human or mechanical failures that could be addressed with policy changes. Questions focusing on normalcy address the extent to which the crisis is a manifestation of routine procedures. In Chapter 1, we discussed various types of recurring crises. A normal crisis would fit within this typology. Sadly, mass shootings, as discussed above, are repeated with enough frequency that they are considered normal and warrant policy debates. By contrast, novel crisis types are highly unusual and difficult to address through policy changes. For example, Ebola outbreaks occur rarely in parts of Africa. The virus causes grotesque bleeding and is almost always fatal. The occurrence of these outbreaks, however, has always been contained quickly. Finally, learning is central to policy debates. The changes in policy that occur in response to focusing events are, in essence, a manifestation of lessons learned from the crisis.

As we mentioned in Chapter 1, crises often lead to new opportunities for organizations and communities. Focusing events can provide the practical means for formalizing such opportunities into formal policies. Thus, focusing events inspire crisis communication that is dedicated to seizing the opportunity to improve public safety in the aftermath of a crisis.

Crisis News Diffusion

The shock and impact of crises create intense public interest. The media play a central role in diffusing or spreading that information. As crises emerge, curious and concerned publics often view television or Internet coverage continuously for extended periods of time. As McIntyre, Spence, and Lachlan (2011) explain, "media exposure is a popular method of coping with crises" (p. 303). Theories of crisis news diffusion seek to understand how and when people receive information about crises. News diffusion includes all channels of communication ranging from television and the Internet to newspapers, radio, and face-to-face interpersonal communication as well as all forms of social media.

The surprise and uncertainty during crises pose challenges for reporters. These trials are further intensified by the high demand for information. Those who study news diffusion are interested in the accuracy as well as the expediency of coverage. Social media resources such as Twitter address the void of information during crises. Recent crises such as the tornadoes in Joplin, Missouri, and Hurricane Sandy reveal that many people experiencing and observing crises build networks and access information regularly via social media. Interestingly, Brian Stelter, a *New York Times* reporter, happened to be near Joplin, Missouri, when the town was destroyed by a massive tornado. The reporter had no access to traditional forms of media coverage. Using his smart phone, he was able to post photos and brief statements using Instagram and Twitter. These posts were viewed by thousands of people wanting information about the devastation in Joplin.

The resilience displayed by the *New York Times* reporter in Joplin is a central feature of news diffusion research. For example, Spence, Lachlan, and Westerman (2009) studied the preparation by local radio stations to continue broadcasting in the wake of a serious crisis, such as a tornado or flood. They found that the majority of stations surveyed had plans for remaining resilient and continuing to broadcast during natural disasters.

Two classic studies in crisis news diffusion occurred when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 and when President Ronald Reagan was wounded in an assassination attempt in 1981. Nine out of 10 people surveyed knew President Kennedy was shot within an hour of the crisis (Greenberg, 1964). Nearly two decades later, the results were similar. Those surveyed after the Reagan attack were aware as quickly and mentioned interpersonal communication, television, and radio as their means of first learning about the crisis (Bantz, Petronio, & Rarick, 1983). Today, the speed of crisis news diffusion is much faster. We can receive news alerts on our smartphones within minutes of a story having been confirmed by a news source. We can also share the information much more quickly and efficiently through social media. Thus, new media

channels have revitalized the study of crisis news diffusion. Beyond the role of the media in framing, understanding, and diffusing information during organizational crises, organizations must also respond and communicate during the crisis. What follows are several prominent theories of crisis communication.

Exemplification Theory

Crises, by their nature, evoke emotional responses, such as fear, anger, and disgust. Exemplification theory provides insight into how these emotional reactions are communicated and remembered over time. The point of analysis for exemplification theory is on short, vivid, and emotionally arousing visual, written, or spoken messages known as exemplars. For example, alligators are seen regularly in residential areas surrounding the many lakes in Central Florida. Although rare, humans in or near the water are occasionally attacked by alligators in the region. Poisonous snakes are also intermittently present near the lakes. Residents and visitors are warned to avoid wading in these lakes by terse warnings posted on walking paths near the lakes. One version of the signs states simply, "Attention: Beware of Wildlife," and includes a picture of an alligator and a snake. The strategy behind the exemplar contained in these signs is to produce a strong emotional reaction that will make people aware of the risk and motivate them to avoid the water. Simply put, exemplification theory examines "the formation and modification of beliefs about phenomena and issues" based on exemplars (Zillmann, 2006, p. S221).

Spence and his colleagues explain that exemplars influence the way people perceive threats to their well-being (Spence, Lachlan, Lin, Sellnow-Richmond, & Sellnow, 2015). They explain that people typically process risk information quickly and subjectively rather than slowly, analytically, and objectively. For this reason, the immediate reactions inspired by exemplars are often extremely persuasive. Returning to our example, simply seeing a picture of a snake and an alligator triggers a sense of caution in most residents as they walk near the water. Beyond warnings, exemplars can cause reputational crises for organizations. The mere mention of bed bugs, for example, is repulsive to most people. Thus, claims that bed bugs might be present in the rooms of a motel chain or apartment complex can immediately deter patrons. As we explain in Chapter 4, simply referring to a product using a derogatory exemplar can create a reputational crisis. In this case, a media reference to "lean finely textured beef" as "pink slime" spiraled into a full-blown crisis for Beef Products Incorporated. Unfortunately, even after such claims are proved false, a relationship between the exemplar and the organization can remain in the subconscious of potential customers (Westerman, Spence, & Lachlan, 2012).

Crisis communicators need to be aware of the impact exemplars can have on the organizations they represent. The lasting images and their links to perceptions of the organization can cause lasting reputational harm. If, however, organizations provide a clear and credible response to such exemplars, organizations can minimize or reverse the harm. In two separate experiments, Spence and his colleagues, first, established the negative impact exemplars have on organizational reputations and second, provided clear evidence that responding to these exemplars through communication channels

used frequently by viewers who were exposed to the exemplar can repair the reputational damage (Spence et al., 2015; Spence, Sellnow-Richmond, Sellnow, & Lachlan, 2016). The lesson for crisis communicators is to pay close attention to references to the organization, in both traditional and new media. When negative exemplars appear, a prompt response is warranted (Spence, Lachlan, Sellnow, Rice, & Seeger, 2017).

Organizational Theories of Crisis Communication

For the past 20 years, communication researchers have developed theoretical approaches for responding to organizational crises (see Table 2.3). This research includes corporate apologia (Hearit, 2006), image repair theory (Benoit, 1995), situational crisis communication theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), and Organizational renewal theory (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2009). Corporate apologia, image repair theory, and situational crisis communication theory identify strategies an organization can use to repair its image and reputation after a crisis. Organizational renewal focuses on learning from the crisis, communicating ethically, considering both the threat and the opportunities associated with the crisis, and creating a prospective vision. We briefly examine each of these research traditions.

Corporate Apologia

Research on corporate apologia was initially conceptualized as the speech of self-defense (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Hearit (2001) defines an *apologia* as not exactly an apology but rather "a response to criticism that seeks to present a compelling competing account of organizational accusations" (p. 502). In this case, crises are created by an accusation of wrongdoing. Hearit and Courtright (2004) explain that apologetic crises "are the result of charges leveled by corporate actors (e.g., media or public interest groups) who contend that an organization is guilty of wrongdoing" (p. 210). Corporate apologia provides a list of communication strategies that the organization can use to respond to these accusations. These communication strategies include "denial, counterattack, differentiation, apology, and legal" (Hearit, 2006, p. 15). These strategies are primarily defensive and are designed principally for an organization to account for its actions after a crisis.

TABLE 2.3 ■ Theories of Crisis Communication

Theory	Characteristics
Corporate apologia	Emphasizes managing the threat created by a persuasive attack against an organization Focuses on an apology for wrongdoing Features communication strategies for the apology
Image repair theory	Emphasizes repairing the threat to the image of the accused Focuses on accounting for organizational actions that caused the crisis Features communication strategies for managing the account
Situational crisis communication theory	Emphasizes lowering crisis attributions of responsibility for the crisis Focuses on determining communication based on the type of crisis and the organization's reputational assets Features flow-chart decision-making process for using crisis response strategies to influence stakeholder perceptions or attributions of responsibility
Organizational renewal theory	Emphasizes opportunities to learn and grow from the crisis Focuses on creating opportunities inherent to crisis events Features broad leadership and organizational communication guidelines, emphasizing strong positive values, an optimistic forward-looking perspective, and learning to overcome the crisis

Image Repair Theory

Benoit (1995) developed a comprehensive theory of image repair. *Image* refers to how the organization is perceived by its stakeholders and publics. Similar to corporate apologia, Benoit (1997) explains that "the key to understanding image repair strategies is to consider the nature of attacks or complaints that prompt such responses" (p. 178). He suggests that two components of the attack are essential. First, the organization must be "held responsible for an action" (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). Second, "that [action must be] considered offensive" (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). Benoit's (1995) theory contains a list of 14 impression management strategies. Five major strategies include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification. Each strategy can be used individually or in combination (Sellnow & Ulmer, 1995; Sellnow, Ulmer, & Snider, 1998). Consistent with corporate apologia, Benoit's image repair strategies focus on how organizations respond to accusations or account for their actions after being accused of a transgression. An effective response is designed to repair the organization's damaged image or reputation.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

A third prominent theory on crisis communication is situational crisis communication theory. Coombs developed this theory by linking attribution theory and crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). His theory "evaluates the reputational threat posed by the crisis situation and then recommends crisis response strategies based upon the reputational threat level" (p. 138). The crisis response strategies in this approach are a synthesis of work on corporate apologia, impression management, and image repair theory. He developed the list by selecting "those [strategies] that appeared on two or more lists developed by crisis experts" (p. 139). He describes four major communication approaches, including denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering. In all, he delineates 10 crisis response strategies. The crisis communication strategies are then used according to the threat to the organization's reputation based on "crisis type, crisis history, and prior reputation" (Coombs, 2012, p. 141).

Coombs (2012) explains that crisis type can be defined by three categories: "victim crisis cluster, accidental crisis cluster, and preventable crisis cluster" (p. 142). The victim cluster involves crises such as natural disasters, rumors, workplace violence, and malevolence. Accidental crises involve challenges, technical error accidents, and technical error product harm. Preventable crises include human error, accidents, human error product harm, and organizational misdeeds. Beyond crisis type, crisis response strategies should also be selected according to the organization's crisis history and prior reputation.

Crisis history and prior reputation are important, because organizations that have recurring crises or poor reputations are not likely to have their messages accepted by stakeholders. Coombs's (2012) theory is based on the idea that, after a crisis, stakeholders "assign responsibility for negative unexpected events" (p. 138). Depending on the crisis type, crisis history, and prior reputation, Coombs provides crisis response recommendations to address the attributions of responsibility toward the organization.

Discourse of Renewal Theory

As you have seen in the previous three theories, much of the research on crisis communication focuses on managing the threat to the image or reputation of the organization during a crisis. We argue there is also potential for positive discourse following a crisis that emphasizes the opportunities inherent to crises. Reputation and image are important organizational concepts, but they do not always play a central role in resolving organizational crises. The upcoming cases in this book provide many examples in which rebuilding, learning, and opportunity are more important than reputation or image. For this reason, we argue that crises also carry the potential for opportunity. To illustrate this idea, we developed a theory we call the *Discourse of Renewal* that emphasizes learning growth and opportunity following crises of all types. We see four theoretical objectives central to the Discourse of Renewal: organizational learning, ethical communication, a prospective rather than retrospective vision, and sound organizational rhetoric. We discuss this theory in much more depth in the final chapter of the book. However, what follows is a brief description of each of the theoretical components of our theory.

Organizational Learning

We believe that an organization that emerges successfully from a crisis must learn from the event. Chapter 9 provides an in-depth understanding of how organizations and communities can learn through failures, including crises. It is also important that the organization illustrates to stakeholders how its learning will help ensure that it will not experience a similar crisis in the future.

Ethical Communication

A second key factor in creating a renewing response is communicating ethically before, during, and after the crisis. Organizations that have not prepared adequately for crisis or are unethical in their business practices are going to have to account for those actions at some time. In fact, unethical actions are often the cause of a crisis. One of the key factors of a crisis is that it reveals the ethical values of the organization. Crises do not build character; they expose the character of the organization. If an organization is unethical before a crisis, those values are likely to be identified during the crisis. Organizations that institute strong, positive value positions, such as openness, honesty, responsibility, accountability, and trustworthiness with key organizational stakeholders before a crisis happens are best able to create renewal following the crisis. Chapter 11 provides an in-depth examination of the importance of ethical communication and the opportunities associated with this crisis communication.

Prospective Versus Retrospective Vision

A third feature of a renewing response is communication focused on the future rather than the past. Theories that emphasize image or reputation emphasize a retrospective vision focused on who is responsible. Organizations that want to create a renewing response are more prospective and emphasize focusing on the future, not on the past. They learn from their mistakes, infuse their communication with bold optimism, and stress rebuilding rather than issues of blame or fault. Chapter 12 provides a detailed examination of Organizational renewal theory and the importance of developing a prospective vision to communicate about crisis.

Effective Organizational Rhetoric

Managing a crisis most often involves communicating with stakeholders to construct and maintain perceptions of reality. Establishing renewal involves leaders motivating stakeholders to stay with the organization through the crisis as well as rebuilding the organization better than it was before. We advocate that leaders who hope to inspire others to embrace their views of crisis as an opportunity must establish themselves as models of optimism and commit to communicating ethically and responsibly. Effective organizational rhetoric then involves leadership with vision and a strong, positive reputation to effectively frame the crisis for stakeholders and persuade them to move beyond the event. The final chapter of this book examines communication strategies for developing sound organizational rhetoric during a crisis.

Crisis Communication Theories That Describe, Explain, and Prescribe

As you can see, there is considerable research from a communication perspective on how to manage and communicate about crises and disasters. In general, theories can describe communication, explain the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of communication, and prescribe how we should communicate. The media theories described in this chapter serve to describe and explain the role of media in framing, focusing, and setting the agenda in crisis communication. The communication theories of corporate apologia and image repair theory describe common responses to organizational crises and can be used to explain the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of those responses. The situational crisis communication theory describes, explains, and prescribes communication strategies to protect the reputation of organizations managing crises. Consistent with situational crisis communication theory, the discourse of renewal theory describes, explains, and prescribes effective responses to crisis. However, a central difference is the diminished role of threat to the reputation of the organization in the discourse of renewal. In many examples of renewal, issues of blame, culpability, image, or reputation never arise as dominant narratives following these types of crisis responses. What makes renewal responses so effective is they mobilize the support of stakeholders and give these groups a vision to follow to overcome the crisis. A crisis response that emphasizes threat to the reputation of an organization typically lacks these qualities and often has the potential to extend the life cycle of the crisis. These organizations often suffer from what we call a *threat bias* in crisis communication.

Understanding and Defining the Threat Bias in Crisis Communication

We believe that an organization that is willing to view a crisis from a balanced perspective, including both threat and opportunity, has a much greater potential for recovering from a crisis. Despite this potential, we observe a persistent bias toward viewing crises solely from the perspective of threat in both theory and practice. As we mentioned at the outset of this chapter, threat is an important part of defining and understanding a crisis. However, we believe that researchers and practitioners often overemphasize and concentrate too much on the threat to an organization's reputation or image to respond effectively. What follows is a discussion of threat bias in defining effective crisis communication.

To avoid the threat bias exemplified in current crisis communication research, we suggest that crisis communicators mindfully define and examine crisis events from a more inclusive perspective. Nathan (2000a) explains the inclusive perspective we recommend:

> [I]n crisis the threat dimensions are usually seen most quickly and are then acted upon, while the potential for opportunity lies dormant. When a crisis is anticipated or when it occurs, the manager should be able to see both threat *and* opportunity features before deciding how to proceed. (p. 4)

Nathan goes on to explain that our understanding of crisis and our crisis communication choices are inextricably linked. In fact, he suggests that focusing solely on the role of threat in crisis "promotes threat response that may, in turn, magnify and even intensify the state of [the] crisis" (Nathan, 2000b, p. 12). We argue that full consideration of both the potential threat and opportunity associated with crisis is a more appropriate and effective way to think about and communicate about crises. For this reason, we argue for mindfully reconsidering our definitions of crisis to include the perceived threat as well as the potential for opportunity emerging from the crisis.

Crises, by their nature, are threats to the survival of organizations. Certainly, no organization should hope for a crisis simply to experience the opportunities described by the theory of renewal. Rather, crises are inherent and inevitable elements of the organizational experience. Those organizations that see crises solely as threats to their public images are likely to respond in defensive and potentially manipulative manners. This defensive posture, at best, offers one benefit—survival. We contend that a combined emphasis on the threat and opportunity of crises fosters the simultaneous benefits of survival and growth. This growth manifests itself in the organization's willing-

ness to respond with rhetorical sensitivity, make ethical decisions, learn from the crisis, and focus on the future. As we have argued throughout this chapter, these elements exemplify a balanced approach to crisis. Applying these elements can produce an opportunity for renewal that far exceeds basic survival.

Summary

In this book, we hope to convince you that effective crisis management is a natural and essential part of the organizing process. We believe that effective crisis planning and communication can enable organizational leaders to better cope with the surprise, threat, and short response time that are a part of all crises. Although there are many types of intentional and unintentional organizational crises, there are consistent strategies that can help an organization turn a crisis situation into an opportunity for improvement. All crises involve effective communication. Resisting the threat bias and understanding the skills needed to communicate effectively is the focus of the next section of this book. Understand that the lessons described in the upcoming chapters are based on well-established research and practice in the multidisciplinary field of research in crisis communication. Furthermore, the next section takes us from conceptually understanding crises and crisis communication theory and moves us toward improving our crisis communication skills. Good luck with this next section of the book.

Part II The Lessons and Practical Application

Chapter 3: Lessons on Effective Crisis Communication
Chapter 4: Applying the Lessons to Produce Effective Crisis Communication
Chapter 5: Lessons on Managing Crisis Uncertainty Effectively
Chapter 6: Applying the Lessons for Managing Crisis Uncertainty Effectively
Chapter 7: Lessons on Effective Crisis Leadership
Chapter 8: Applying the Lessons for Developing Effective Crisis Leadership

3 Lessons on Effective Crisis Communication

In the first two chapters, we defined crisis communication and discussed some key theories of crisis communication. This chapter builds on these ideas by discussing how to effectively communicate during a crisis. Over the past 30 years, a considerable amount of crisis communication research has been conducted. Some of the more recent research focuses on strategies to help organizations effectively respond to a crisis. This chapter defines key approaches to communicating effectively during a crisis. We believe that an effective response to a crisis has the potential to turn what could be a disaster for an organization into an opportunity to move beyond the event and to learn, grow, prosper, and renew.

This chapter describes 10 lessons for effective crisis communication. These lessons should give any crisis communicator the key elements of an effective crisis response. The lessons, drawn from numerous case studies and research on crisis communication, address several issues. Some of the lessons—such as determining your goals, for example—can usually be accomplished quite quickly and easily. Other lessons, such as managing stakeholder relationships, can be much more complex and time-consuming. You may be surprised by some of the advice we provide in this chapter. For instance, we discuss the importance of using clear, accurate, and direct messages in your initial crisis response. In addition, we provide some advice about overreassuring stakeholders. These lessons may appear somewhat counterintuitive. Nevertheless, research has consistently shown these strategies to be effective means for managing crises.

Determining Your Goals

One of the first things a crisis communicator needs to determine following a crisis is the goal of the crisis response. Goals are often broad statements that can help guide decision making and can connect to the larger values of the organization. One goal of crisis communication can be to reduce the impact of the crisis on those affected. Another goal of the crisis response may be to keep the organization's image intact or maintain the customer base. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) adopted the goals of "be first, be right, be credible" for their crisis communication (CDC, 2014). These broad goals provide clear objectives for how the CDC seeks to communicate during a crisis. In essence, the CDC's objective during a crisis is to establish contact with stakeholders quickly and credibly. Responding quickly can help reduce harm during a crisis. Determining the goals is a key step in preparing for and responding to crisis. Linking these goals to the organization's mission and values can help ensure that the response is in harmony with larger strategies. The larger strategy can also reduce uncertainty for the organization because, once goals are defined, the organization is better able to consciously think about what tactics can be used to accomplish its objectives.

Some of an organization's crisis communication goals may actually contradict one another. For instance, public health departments typically have a key goal of informing the public about health crises. However, at times, they are not able to meet this goal because of individual right-to-privacy laws that prohibit such communication. Determining, ranking, and identifying potential obstacles to goals of crisis communication before a crisis is a key step in effective crisis communication. When organizations prepare for crises, they consider their organizational values and crisis communication goals. In addition, they should collaborate with other groups, work out potential goal conflicts, and establish partnerships.

> Lesson 1
>
> Determine your goals for crisis communication.

Partnering With Crisis Audiences

We believe that, once goals for a crisis response are established, the second essential part for crisis communicators is developing a mindset about the role of stakeholders in crisis communication. A critical part of effective crisis communication is determined by the relationships organizations have with their stakeholders. Organizations should work before a crisis to cultivate strong partnerships with stakeholders.

We define *partnerships* as follows:

> Partnerships are equal communication relationships with groups or organizations that have an impact on an organization. Partnerships are established through honest and open dialogue about important issues for each group or organization. Partners may be advocates for the organization or they may be groups that are antagonistic toward the organization.

We believe that effective crisis communication starts long before a crisis hits and should be part of every organization's business and strategic plans. Establishing and maintaining equal relationships and partnerships with groups and organizations is critical to effective crisis communication. We do not believe it is appropriate to try to manipulate or deceive stakeholders in a way that gets them to do what you want. Rather, we believe organizations should create a dialogue with stakeholders about important issues and work out equitable solutions. While this can be a time-consuming process, it is essential to crisis preparedness and eventually, an effective crisis response.

We advise organizations to partner with local media when preparing for a crisis. Public health departments, for example, should work with local media before a crisis occurs. As we mentioned earlier, public health departments are charged with providing important health information to the communities they serve. The media are often the outlet for this communication. However, individual right-to-privacy laws often preclude public health departments from being completely transparent in their communication. This limitation can lead to frustration on the part of the media. Through open and honest discussions, public health departments can explain their positions on privacy laws, and the media can share their expectations for public access to information. Our experience suggests that, through these discussions, expectations can be set and uncertainty reduced about how public health departments communicate important health issues and how the media prefer to receive that information. In addition, working out these differences before a crisis improves the chances of an effective response.

Research suggests that the public or an organization's stakeholders can even help an organization move beyond a crisis. Often, the public helps identify a crisis and is very

important to resolving a crisis. We have studied many cases of floods, and one of the most important ways to control floodwaters is by building temporary dikes to hold back the water. Building dikes means using sandbags and many volunteers to fill and stack the bags. Fighting a flood requires the cooperation of the public. Almost all infectious disease outbreaks require the help of the public as well. Hand washing, covering sneezes and staying away from others while sick are important actions by the public for controlling disease outbreaks. In the case of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014 through 2016, the epidemic could not be contained until the public was educated about the disease and how it was spread.

> Lesson 2
>
> Before a crisis, develop true, equal partnerships with organizations and groups that are important to the organization.

> Lesson 3
>
> Acknowledge your stakeholders, including the media, as partners when managing a crisis.

Understanding the Diversity of Your Audiences

Effective crisis communicators consider the diversity of the audiences they will be in contact with after a crisis rather than viewing them as one large, homogenous public. In Chapter 2, we defined stakeholders as internal or external groups that can have an impact on the organization. A list of possible stakeholders can provide a map of communication partners. Here are some examples:

- Employees
- Competitors
- Creditors
- Consumers
- Government agencies and officials
- The community
- Activist groups
- The environment
- Stockholders
- The media

This list could be even larger, depending on the organization and its interests. To better manage a crisis and our time in preparing for a crisis, we must determine which stakeholders the organization considers primary and secondary.

Primary and Secondary Stakeholders Defined

When considering the diverse nature of a single organization's stakeholders, an understanding of primary and secondary stakeholders is helpful. Heath (1997) explains that this identification of stakeholders must include both "allies-supporters and opponents" (p. 28).

> *Primary stakeholders* are those groups defined by an organization as most important to its success. These are groups that the organization interacts with regularly, like customers, suppliers, and employees.
>
> *Secondary stakeholders* are key groups that do not play an active role in the day-to-day activities of the organization but are still important to its overall success. This may include government agencies or activist groups.

When using the stakeholders to define organizational audiences, we then ask the following questions:

- How often do you communicate with these stakeholders?
- Does this stakeholder have a direct impact on the success of your organization?
- What groups or organizations view you as a stakeholder?
- How often do these groups communicate with you?
- Are you aware of and do you listen to the concerns of these groups?
- On which issues of importance to both primary and secondary stakeholder groups do you agree and disagree?

We find that many organizations are aware of their stakeholders but do not communicate with them, or if they do, the communication is very infrequent. When organizations need to communicate following a crisis, they are often communicating with groups they do not know very well. This lack of familiarity exists, because the organization has not established any prior relationships and has no base for the communication. If an organization does not have a partnership with stakeholders prior to a crisis, the communication following one can be quite awkward and often ineffective. A crisis is a bad time to make a first acquaintance with an important stakeholder group. Effective crisis communicators listen to their stakeholders and treat their concerns as legitimate, even before a crisis occurs. In this way, effective crisis communicators know the expectations of their stakeholders and their information needs following a crisis.

What is worse than not knowing your stakeholders is having a negative relationship with them. One of the most important concerns for organizations is establishing strong, positive stakeholder relationships. At times, every organization is going to have

stakeholders that are antagonistic and maybe even aggressive. That being true, organizations need to follow the classic advice: Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

Organizations need to work with stakeholders to narrow gaps between stakeholder and organizational expectations. Every organization will need help during a crisis, and generating goodwill with stakeholders prior to a crisis will lessen stakeholder communication demands during and after the crisis. Typically, organizations do not readily address those stakeholders with whom they are in conflict. We believe that communicating with antagonistic stakeholders over time and listening to their concerns is a key to understanding their needs. It can also help the organization understand what kinds of objections and complaints might be raised following a crisis.

To communicate more effectively, organizations must determine the types of communication relationships or partnerships they currently have with primary stakeholders (see Table 3.1). *Positive stakeholder relationships* are defined as both the organization and the stakeholder viewing each other as partners. Neither party may agree on every issue, but both listen to one another and work to create agreements on those issues where they disagree. *Negative stakeholder relationships* develop because of poor communication between the organization and its stakeholders. The organization and the stakeholders distrust and misunderstand one another and may become antagonistic. *Ambivalent stakeholder relationships* are defined as the organization and stakeholders engineering consent with one another. Engineering consent was an idea developed by the public relations practitioner, Edward Bernays. Advertising and public relations can be used to manipulate groups into agreeing or appearing to agree. The relationship illustrates a lack of interest in one another and suggests that one group is trying to control the other. *Nonexistent stakeholder relationships* are defined by a lack of awareness or even acknowledgment of a particular stakeholder group. In this case, the organization and its stakeholders are not even aware that they impact one another.

Lesson 4

Organizations need to develop strong, positive primary and secondary stakeholder relationships.

TABLE 3.1 ■ Possible Primary and Secondary Stakeholder Relationships or Partnerships

Stakeholder Relationship	Example
Positive	Symmetrical relationship in which both organization and stakeholder understand, acknowledge, communicate, and listen effectively to one another
Negative	An antagonistic relationship between organization and stakeholder; organization is not open to communicating with or listening to the stakeholder group
Ambivalent	No true partnership; organization and stakeholder each work to engineer consent with the other group, but neither group listens to the other
Nonexistent	Organization not aware of stakeholder and does not communicate with or acknowledge the stakeholder group

Communicating With Underrepresented Groups During Crises

Organizations must also consider the diversity and communication needs of diverse groups of stakeholders during a crisis. These may include members of minority groups based on culture, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or similar factors, people from different regions or nations, and those with very different values and needs. Particular audiences may have specific communication needs or interests. Current research suggests there are three options in developing crisis messages for underrepresented groups (Dutta, 2007). These options include the following:

- A culture-neutral approach
- A culturally sensitive approach
- A culture-centered approach

A culture-neutral approach takes the position that all stakeholder groups act on and access crisis communication information in similar manners. Crisis communication during Hurricane Katrina illustrates a culture-neutral approach to crisis communication. Crisis communication messages during the hurricane were constructed and presented without thought or concern for the socioeconomic background or crisis communication needs of underrepresented populations in New Orleans. As a result, the needs of these groups were not taken into account or were neglected during the hurricane. Many of the poorest residents were unable to evacuate because they did not have cars.

The culturally sensitive approach to communicating with underrepresented populations suggests that crisis communication messages should be tailored to the cultural characteristics of underrepresented groups to meet their crisis communication needs. For instance, some groups may want crisis information provided by spokespersons from their own cultural group. Others may want information provided at certain locations, such as churches or community gathering places. Still other groups may want crisis messages to contain certain terms or be written at a particular literacy level. The characteristics of each population can vary considerably; however, the goal of the culturally sensitive crisis communicator is to determine the characteristics of the population and develop messages to meet the needs of each group.

The final approach and one we believe is the most appropriate is the culture-centered approach. The culture-centered approach takes the culturally sensitive approach one step further by actually including underrepresented populations in preparing for and communicating about crises. In this case, crisis communicators would involve underrepresented stakeholders in determining who would present their crisis messages and in what manner. The culture-centered approach involves including underrepresented

populations in determining the appropriate crisis messages, the most effective channels for information dissemination, and the most trusted people to deliver crisis messages. This approach suggests developing partnerships with underrepresented stakeholders prior to a crisis to ensure effective communication with these groups following an event. To be successful in their crisis communications, every organization should develop relationships with underrepresented populations from their communities and make them part of their crisis communication planning. What follows is a discussion about listening, which is a key part of developing relationships with stakeholders.

A Word on Partnerships and Listening

While we most often think of crisis communication as speaking or sending messages, receiving or listening is just as important. One of a crisis communicator's most common mistakes is attempting to engineer consent from the public by seeking to sell the organization's side of the story. This strategy, known as *spin*, often leaves the public feeling it does not have the full story, which can create resentment and distrust toward the organization. At worst, the organization does not even address the public's key concerns. When this happens, the organization may undermine its reputation and brand.

Listening to stakeholders is also a crucial aspect of post-crisis communication. Effective communication is not a one-way process. We advocate that, after a crisis, organizations not only provide information to stakeholders but also schedule time to listen to their concerns and to answer their questions. Listening in the form of public meetings, where stakeholders have the opportunity to voice their concerns, is critical to post-crisis response and recovery efforts. Public information sessions include opportunities for stakeholders to interact with organizational representatives, examine information about the crisis and response and recovery efforts, and collect additional information in the form of fact or Q & A sheets if desired. In addition, the organization can hear stakeholder concerns firsthand. Once concerns are voiced, the organization can work to narrow the gap between what it is doing and what the public or stakeholders expect.

For some reason, these public sessions are one of the processes organizations have the most difficulty adopting. In training sessions, we often explain that organizations should keep their friendly stakeholders close and their discontented stakeholders closer. However, many organizations feel compelled to distance aggravated stakeholders and only communicate with and listen to stakeholders with whom they agree. This, in our opinion, is an ineffective practice. We have found that organizations are better able to prepare and respond to crises when they have coordinated with all stakeholder groups before and after the crisis. When dealing with aggravated or discontented stakeholders, every effort should be made to address the issues as quickly as possible. Organizations should make this exercise a part of their crisis planning.

It is important to acknowledge that public meetings about crisis can create uncomfortable, accusatory, and even angry exchanges. One meeting we attended concerned the contaminated water in Flint, Michigan. Residents had been drinking water contaminated with lead for several months before officials acknowledged the problem. Many residents were extremely angry, and the discussions were sometimes very heated. Careful listening and honest efforts to hear helped reduce some of the anger and helped everyone understand the issues and emotions surrounding the crisis. In these cases, it's

important to acknowledge that people are angry and that these emotions are both natural and legitimate. These meetings were an absolutely critical step in rebuilding some level of trust and helping the community heal after a devastating crisis.

Once you have determined that listening is a key factor in effective crisis communication, the next step is to focus on determining which audiences you should listen to and how to address their questions. This does not always mean that you have all the answers. Sometimes this means acknowledging that you don't have all the answers but are committing to do your best to find them.

> Lesson 5
>
> Effective crisis communication involves listening to your stakeholders.

What Information Do Stakeholders Need Following a Crisis?

We offer four broad suggestions for communicating effectively following a crisis: communicating early and often with stakeholders about the crisis, identifying the cause, contacting everyone affected, and communicating about current and future risks.

Communicate Early and Often With Both Internal and External Stakeholders

One of the fundamentals that crisis communicators should know is that they must make immediate contact with their stakeholders or as the CDC suggests, "be first." Although the severity of the problem may not be known, stakeholders still need early and consistent communication about how the organization is responding. Getting out in front a crisis early can be very important in establishing credibility and in getting the message out early. Social media now allows organizations to communicate very quickly as a crisis is developing.

Many organizations fail in communicating because they do not make themselves available to stakeholders. Our advice to crisis communication students and practitioners is to communicate early and consistently throughout the development of a crisis. When information is not available, just listening to stakeholders and fielding questions is much more valuable than stonewalling or being perceived as inaccessible.

Identifying the Cause of the Crisis

A critical factor in resolving any crisis is determining the cause or causes. Once the cause has been identified, some of the uncertainty is cleared up, and corrective action can be taken. The primary problem here, however, is that identifying the cause of the crisis often takes a great deal of time, as we mentioned earlier. Sometimes there are multiple causes, and sometimes cause is a very complicated interaction of multiple factors. Many different independent and governmental groups may be involved in identifying the cause or causes of a crisis, and they may disagree with or question the accuracy of the other groups' evidence. In addition, immediately after a crisis, accurate and appropriate information about causes may just not be available. During this time, the media and various other stakeholders often speculate about who is responsible, who will be blamed, and who will have to pay for the harm. Organizations can become defensive and closed to outside agencies as they try to stonewall or spin the story positively so that the organization isn't blamed. This can negatively affect credibility and relationships with stakeholders.

Stonewalling, a refusal to communicate or even cooperate, is seldom an effective approach to crisis communication. Not only does it keep information from being disseminated, it creates distrust and can make stakeholders even more hostile. It is also important to recognize that stonewalling ensures that the organization's side of the story about cause won't be told. This can put the organization in a very reactive and defensive position.

Contacting Everyone Affected by the Crisis

At the onset of a crisis, organizations should contact each individual or group affected. When communicating with stakeholders following a crisis, it is helpful to make sure to communicate with compassion, concern, and empathy. This does not mean that the spokesperson should not be professional. However, because of the dramatic nature of many crises and the impact these events have on people's lives, it is important to make sure that people are addressed with compassion for what they are going through, concern for their welfare, and empathy. James Lee Witt (Witt & Morgan, 2002), former director of FEMA, explains that communication skills are critical after a crisis:

> You can empathize with their pain and embarrassment at being helpless. You can make adjustments to the recovery process based on their need for dignity. You can make sure they have shelter and a hot meal. You can listen to their stories and acknowledge their concerns. You can hug them and let them cry on your shoulder. You can say to them as I do, we can't bring back your memories, but we can help you build new ones. (p. 147)

As you can see, compassion, concern, and empathy are key communication strategies in moving beyond the crisis and generating opportunities for renewal and optimism. Empathy can reduce the level of anger and can help create conditions for stakeholders to support the organization's recovery and renewal.

Determining Current and Future Risks

To manage the uncertainty, organizations should also be aware of the current risks they face as well as potential future risks. Organizations that consider potential risks in their environments are able to prepare for and reduce uncertainty about these events, should they occur. Stakeholders will want to know whether they are at risk for similar crises in the future. In effective crisis communication, the organization is able to explain its corrective actions to stakeholders so that these groups feel confident the organization has made adequate changes and corrections.

Within these four broad strategies for effective crisis communication, there are also some important communication approaches or tactics that need to be addressed. The first concentrates on the role of certainty in crisis communication. For some time, certain and clear communication has been the hallmark of effective crisis communication. Although clear and certain communication can be important and contribute to an effective response, we believe that sometimes it can get an organization into more trouble, can complicate the overall response for the organization, and can even be irresponsible.

> Lesson 6
>
> Communicate early about the crisis, acknowledge uncertainty, and assure the public that you will maintain contact with them about current and future risk.

Is Certain Communication Always the Best Approach?

Much of the early crisis communication research suggests that organizations should provide clear and consistent messages to stakeholders as quickly as possible (Marconi, 1992; Schuetz, 1990; Seeger, 1986). Although this can be good advice, we now know that when responding to some types of crises or under some conditions this recommendation is not always practical or even advisable. Organizations that communicate too quickly with too much certainty often must later retract their public comments. Public statements recorded by the media and noted by stakeholders can subsequently be used against an organization. We believe that, in their initial public statements, organizations can reflect some level of ambiguity or uncertainty that will enable them to both communicate with their public and emphasize the level of uncertainty they are experiencing at the time—in effect, a more accurate reflection of the situation. After all, in the early moments of a crisis, sometimes the facts are just not clear.

Peter Sandman (2004), a risk and crisis communication consultant, examined some successful and unsuccessful responses to the 2004 outbreak of bird flu in Asia, which was a devastating crisis for poultry farmers. During the crisis, various government and public health organizations were asked to comment on whether the avian flu could mutate and become as infectious as ordinary human flu. Sandman explained that Bob Dietz, a World Health Organization (WHO) spokesperson, communicated effectively by acknowledging the uncertainty of the crisis when he confirmed that a Vietnamese woman's bird flu virus contained no human influenza genes. Dietz explained, "The results are encouraging, but unfortunately, they are still not the conclusive proof we need to fully discount the possibility of human-to-human transmission of the virus" (p. 46). Conversely, when asked if the bird flu had spread to Thailand, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra responded, "It's not a big deal. If it's bird flu, it's bird flu. We can handle it. . . . We have been working very hard. . . . Please trust the government. It did not make an announcement in the very beginning because it did not want the public to panic" (p. 46). Sandman pointed out that the language in the second example is too certain and borders on overreassuring the public that there will not be a problem. Organizations must be able to communicate what they know at the time. As a result, there will be cases when they must say, "We do not know anything yet; however, this is what we are doing regarding our crisis investigation." At times, because accurate information is not always available, it is most appropriate and even most honest to say, "We do not know." This should be followed with some indication about what is being done to find the answers and when those might be available.

Lesson 7

Avoid certain or absolute answers to the public and media until sufficient information

is available.

Avoid Overreassuring Your Stakeholders

Making sure the organization does not overreassure audiences about the risk or impact of a crisis is consistent with our points about communicating uncertainty during a crisis. A common misconception about crisis communication is that when a crisis hits, the public will panic and respond with mass hysteria. The example that is sometimes given is people who have just evacuated running back into a burning building. Research on crisis over many years has shown very little if any evidence of people panicking during a crisis (e.g., Quarantelli, 1988). In fact, the opposite is often true. In many cases, it's hard to get people to take action to protect themselves when there is a real threat. It's hard, for example, to get people to evacuate when they are threatened by hurricanes. Most of the examples we have studied suggest that people behave rationally during crisis. No doubt, people will take protective actions for themselves, but for the most part, they act in a logical manner based on the information they have. Dr. Barbara Reynolds (2002), CDC spokesperson, explains that "the condition most conducive to panic isn't bad news; it is conflicting messages from those in authority" (p. 24). In this case, when the public believes that they cannot trust those in authority or that information is being hidden from them, the level of perceived threat is likely to increase substantially. Crisis managers sometimes believe that if they don't overreassure, stakeholders will panic. If stakeholders believe they are being misled and that the risk is being downplayed, they will lose confidence in authority figures and may very well act inappropriately.

> Lesson 8
>
> Do not overreassure stakeholders about the impact the crisis will have on them.

Tell Your Stakeholders How to Protect Themselves

The public most often looks for information about how to ensure their safety. This may involve specific actions, such as evacuating, sheltering in place, boiling water, or the returning or disposing of certain products. When General Motors was managing the risk associated with defective ignition switches on cars, it advised consumers to remove extra keys from their key chains. This reduced the level of pressure on the switches. Even when organizations are able to suggest protective actions, they should not overreassure; rather, they should focus on self-efficacy—communicating information about how people can protect themselves from the effects of the crisis in a realistic and effective manner.

Information communicated to stakeholders about how to protect themselves—self-efficacy—should be useful and practical and should suit their diverse needs. Dr. Barbara Reynolds (2002) suggests that crisis communicators should give minimum, middle, and maximum responses for self-protection. For example, to protect oneself from drinking water contaminated with microbes, she suggests offering three options; "(1) Use chlorine drops if safety is uncertain, (2) boil water for 2 minutes, or (3) buy bottled water. We recommend boiling water" (p. 24). In this case, people are given information, alternatives, and choices about how to protect themselves.

We believe that self-efficacy messages should be accurate, useful, and instructive in actually protecting stakeholders from potential risk. In 2003, the Department of Homeland Security issued recommendations that people have a supply of plastic sheeting and duct tape to seal windows and doors for protection during a terrorist attack involving chemical or biological material. This was an impractical suggestion for many reasons, including the fact that people could be suffocated from lack of air. However, in cases like the 1997 North Dakota floods, when the public was actively involved in sandbagging dikes to keep homes in the Red River Valley safe, including the public in a crisis response was not only necessary but proved to be an effective and renewing approach for many citizens of Fargo and Grand Forks, North Dakota, and Moorhead and East Grand Forks, Minnesota (see Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002).

The approach to crisis communication we suggest may seem strange or even counterintuitive. Rather than immediately responding to questions concerning a crisis with certainty to prevent the public from "panicking," we advocate that an organization's communication should carry some level of ambiguity or uncertainty. This may be as simple as saying "We are still gathering information, but this is what we know now." As with this statement, we advocate against offering absolute answers or overreassuring the public until adequate information is available. In addition, once an organization communicates statements of self-efficacy after a crisis, it is one step closer to involving stakeholders as a resource for crisis management. However, even statements of self-ef-

ficacy should include levels of ambiguity that represent the low, moderate, and high levels of concern stakeholders may feel.

> Lesson 9
>
> The public needs useful and practical statements of self-efficacy during a crisis.

Reducing and Intensifying Uncertainty Before, During, and After Organizational Crises

A Summary of Crisis Communication Research and Practice and Renewal

Through extensive research, we have identified ways that organizations may intensify or reduce crisis ambiguity and uncertainty. The communication strategies discussed in this chapter suggest a communication process approach to preparing for and communicating during and after a crisis. Effective pre-crisis communication practices include establishing strong, positive, and virtuous leadership and core values to guide crisis decisions. Exhibiting open and honest communication with stakeholders before a crisis develops goodwill among these groups, which can serve to reduce uncertainty at the onset of a crisis. Finally, organizations that develop a crisis plan and in particular, show commitment to developing a reservoir of goodwill and support of their stakeholders are more able to communicate effectively during a crisis. In this case, effective communication strategies during pre-crisis include the following:

- Strong positive leadership, values and goals
- Open and honest communication with stakeholders
- A commitment to stakeholders and developing a reservoir of goodwill

Conversely, before a crisis, organizations can take part in activities that we predict will actually intensify the levels of ambiguity and uncertainty at the onset of a crisis. First, if there are poor communication relationships with stakeholders within or outside the organization, ambiguity and uncertainty are likely to be intensified after a crisis. Organizations should pay particular attention to internal superior–subordinate communication as well as their relationships with external stakeholders. Second, organizations that distance aggravated stakeholders and ignore their needs are more likely to experience heightened ambiguity and uncertainty following a crisis. Third, organizations that try and engineer consent from their internal or external stakeholders rather than listening to their needs are likely to experience heightened ambiguity or uncertainty. Finally, organizations that do not take part in crisis planning or conduct any simulations and exercises are more likely to communicate ineffectively during a crisis. In this case, predictors of ineffective pre-crisis communication include the following:

- Poor communication relationships with stakeholders
- Distance from aggravated stakeholders
- Failure to listen to stakeholder needs
- Failure to plan for a crisis

During a crisis, there are key communication strategies that are useful in reducing the effects of crisis-induced uncertainty and ambiguity. For instance, having a mission statement and core values to inform crisis decision making is very helpful in reducing uncertainty. Establishing positive stakeholder relationships to provide support during

a crisis can help reduce uncertainty and improve communication. Organizations that have conducted risk assessments and taken provisions to manage those risks are less likely to experience crisis uncertainty. James Lee Witt (Witt & Morgan, 2002) explains "communication when it's working can help you know when a crisis is coming sometimes early enough to prevent it" (p. 46). Organizations that provide continual and consistent updates on the crisis recovery process are able to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity for their key stakeholders. Finally, organizations that communicate openly and honestly are able to reduce crisis-induced uncertainty more effectively. Crisis communication strategies that create effective communication practices include the following:

- Using core values and crisis communication goals developed pre-crisis to guide your response
- Providing consistent updates on the recovery process
- Communicating openly and honestly

Organizations that stonewall or say "no comment" are likely to intensify ambiguity or uncertainty during a crisis. Not having a crisis plan or strong values in place are also likely to increase uncertainty. Not knowing who to call or what to say will increase uncertainty and ambiguity during a crisis. Communication that serves to minimize the crisis or overreassure stakeholders that the impact of the crisis will be small often serves instead to make crisis uncertainty much worse. Finally, communication with certainty about complex issues surrounding a crisis has the ability to create more uncertainty during a crisis. Crisis communication strategies that minimize crisis communication effectiveness following a crisis include

- Saying "no comment"
- Not knowing whom to call or having established values to base your response on
- Overreassuring about the impact of the crisis
- Communicating with certainty about the crisis

Finally, post-crisis communication is not effective when an organization tries to spin the crisis to reduce its responsibility. In this case, an organization may try to obscure or shift blame, diminish its role in the crisis, or complicate the evidence surrounding responsibility for the crisis. Beyond being unethical, these communication tactics increase the risk to the organization, heighten crisis uncertainty, and delay crisis recovery. In this case, ineffective post-crisis communication involves

- Spinning responsibility for the crisis
- Obscuring blame

Conversely, organizations that emphasize learning from the crisis and ethical communication through transparency, open access to information, and honest communication that provides a prospective vision for recovery are more likely to reduce uncer-

tainty post-crisis. They have a greater chance to not just recover but renew. Post-crisis communication designed to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity involves the following:

- Learning from the crisis
- Communicating ethically and openly about responsibility
- Providing a prospective vision for recovery

This section describes effective and ineffective communication strategies before, during, and after a crisis. The decisions an organization's leaders make will have a profound impact on the effectiveness of the crisis response and the level of uncertainty stakeholders experience. Making good choices about how to prepare for, manage, and resolve a crisis can do much to help an organization recover from a crisis and create opportunities for future growth and renewal. What follows is a discussion about the potential opportunities associated with crises.

Social Media and Effective Crisis Communication

Social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, instant messaging, and blogging, are essential tools for effective crisis communication. Social media allows for a very rapid and direct response. Sherman (2010) explains that monitoring and using social media can be beneficial to crisis communicators. She explains social media can be used to

- Monitor what is being said about your company
- Anticipate potential crises
- Communicate to stakeholders during a crisis

Organizations can use Internet tools to track tweets and discussions of their organization's names through free sites like Google Trends, TweetBeep, and Social Mention. Many organizations monitor social media as a way to track what customers and the public are saying about their products and services. The CDC uses social media, including Internet search data, to rapidly identify disease outbreaks. A spike in searches about "stomach flu" might signal an outbreak in some kinds of infectious diseases, such as shigella. Shigella is easily transmitted in food and can cause severe diarrhea. Organizations are able to see problems brewing long in advance if they monitor this media, and they may be able to take action to correct problems when they see negative comments or complaints before they become larger problems. Organizations that monitor social media are better prepared to anticipate potential crises and are better able to stay connected with stakeholders that prefer this mode of communication.

Sherman (2010) suggests the following advice for preventing small issues from becoming full-scale crises:

- Acknowledge the issue, and apologize if there was a mistake
- Publicly explain that the issue will be fixed immediately and that everyone will be notified when the issue is resolved
- Privately message people who had tweeted about the problem and assure them that the problem is being resolved
- Publicly address those who cannot be reached privately by referencing them with the @ sign and their Twitter name with a personal explanation

Not every instance may demand a response such as this. In addition, we do not recommend admitting fault when you have not made a mistake. However, in those times that you or your organization have made a mistake, it is best to solve the problem as quickly as possible and notify stakeholders when the problem is resolved. In this case, social media provides useful channels to address potential issues before they become problems. However, without close monitoring of these channels, organizations are

likely to miss the opportunity to address potential problems in advance.

During a crisis, social media can be used to provide regular updates and information to crisis stakeholders. Blogs, tweets, instant messages, and Facebook pages can be used to keep people up to date about the crisis and can also be used to collect information about solutions that may resolve the crisis.

Social media should be considered part of any crisis communication response. However, principles of effective crisis communication should be used to focus the content of the messages delivered through social media. In other words, incorporate the lessons previously described in this chapter and the theories discussed in Chapter 2. For instance, Stracener (2012) interviewed six leading experts in social media and crisis response from public and private industries. His research found that these experts were not yet using theory to develop the content of their social media messages. Rather, they were emphasizing getting hits on their websites and retweets of the content of the messages on social media. If social media is going to be effective in crisis communication, there needs to be a closer connection between the theory and practice of crisis communication. Doing so can create unexpected opportunities for effective crisis communication. Sherman (2010) explains "every criticism now has the potential to become an opportunity to connect more closely with customers. . . . When a crisis does occur, social media can offer monitoring and communication solutions to disseminate information at a more rapid rate than most traditional media" (para. 27). Clearly, social media combined with strategies for effective crisis communication have the potential to lessen the impact or even prevent a crisis from happening. What follows are some additional positive results that can be achieved from effective crisis communication.

The Power of Positive Action

Knowing how to frame events is one of the most important strategies an organization can employ to move beyond a crisis. We have found that when an organization is able to think about the positive potential rather than the negative aspects of a crisis, it is better able to move beyond the event. Acting toward a crisis in a positive way can help lead to renewal and future growth. Many organizations frame crises in terms of alleviating responsibility and shifting the blame to other organizations. They also frame a crisis in terms of it being a terrible tragedy for the organization and its members. Organizations that are able to frame crises in more optimistic terms are better able to move beyond them. Thinking about the potential positive outcomes, the silver lining of a crisis, focuses an organization on moving beyond the event and provides a positive direction organizational members can work toward. Meyers and Holusha (1986) described seven potential positive results that can come from a crisis:

1. Heroes are born.
2. Change is accelerated.
3. Latent problems are faced.
4. People are changed.
5. New strategies evolve.
6. Early warning systems develop.
7. New competitive advantages appear.

Meyers and Holusha (1986) suggest that leaders who manage crises effectively can be viewed as heroes. Change can be accelerated following a crisis, because resources, including money, are typically made available and people can clearly see the need for change. Latent problems are faced because these are typically the ones that created the crisis in the first place. A crisis can create opportunities to solve problems that have been ignored or not understood. People can be changed, because they now see the impact their faulty beliefs have on the organization and its stakeholders. New strategies evolve, because the organization must develop new approaches to doing business to move beyond the crisis. Early warning systems develop so that the organization will be better able to foresee and manage a potential future crisis. Finally, new competitive advantages can appear after a crisis, because the entire nature of business may change. For instance, after 9/11, the airline industry became much different. Where large airlines dominated the market before 9/11, small niche market airlines, such as Southwest Airlines, JetBlue, and Song, are now having the greatest success. Only time will tell how long this competitive advantage will remain. Effective crisis communication, then, involves being positive and thinking about the potential positive aspects of crisis while dealing with the event. When thinking positively, organizations have the ability to frame the event in a positive way for stakeholders.

Lesson 10

Effective crisis communicators acknowledge that positive factors can arise from organizational crises.

Summary

This chapter examined effective crisis communication based on several best practices. We examined the role of listening in effective crisis communication, the need to understand the variety of audiences that an organization will face in a crisis, and what these audiences want to hear. We discussed the role of certainty in crisis communication and the power of positive action and thinking and its effect on moving beyond a crisis.

The next chapter illustrates how leaders can enact and employ the lessons from this chapter. Good luck with the case studies in the next chapter.

> Lessons on Communicating Effectively in Crisis Situations
>
> Lesson 1: Determine your goals for crisis communication.
> Lesson 2: Before a crisis, develop true equal partnerships with organizations and groups that are important to the organization.
> Lesson 3: Acknowledge your stakeholders, including the media, as partners when managing a crisis.
> Lesson 4: Organizations need to develop strong, positive primary and secondary stakeholder relationships.
> Lesson 5: Effective crisis communication involves listening to your stakeholders.
> Lesson 6: Communicate early about the crisis, acknowledge uncertainty, and assure the public that you will maintain contact with them about current and future risk.
> Lesson 7: Avoid certain or absolute answers to the public and media until sufficient information is available.
> Lesson 8: Do not overreassure stakeholders about the impact the crisis will have on them.
> Lesson 9: The public needs useful and practical statements of self-efficacy during a crisis.
> Lesson 10: Effective crisis communicators acknowledge that positive factors can arise from organizational crises.

4 Applying the Lessons to Produce Effective Crisis Communication

After examining the 10 lessons for effective crisis communication, it is time to work on building your effective crisis communication skills. The following cases are designed to help the reader identify and discuss each of the key lessons described and discussed in the previous chapter. Following each case, the reader is asked to make a determination about whether the crisis communicators were effective or ineffective. This chapter contains seven real-life cases that examine lessons on effective crisis communication. The first case provides a detailed account of BP and the United States Coast Guard's communication following BP's 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The second case examines Aaron Feuerstein's crisis communication following a 1995 fire at his textile manufacturing plant in Methuen, Massachusetts. The third case, discusses a food-borne illness outbreak at Odwalla Inc., a beverage company known for its health conscious products. The fourth case describes the depiction of lean finely textured beef as "pink slime." The fifth case examines the response of Greensburg, Kansas, after tornado destruction in 2007. The sixth case examines a crisis that played out on social media when Domino's Pizza was blindsided by a hoax online by two of its employees. Good luck with working through these cases while developing your crisis communication skills and experience at the same time!

Example 4.1. The Largest Environmental Crisis in United States History: BP and the United States Coast Guard Respond

On April 20, 2010, at approximately 10:00 PM CDT there was an explosion on the mobile offshore drilling unit Deepwater Horizon located in the Gulf of Mexico. The semisubmersible oil rig was leased and operated by BP Exploration and Production. The explosion caused a fire on the oil rig. Shortly after the initial fire, a second explosion capsized the oil rig. The Deepwater Horizon settled 1500 feet northwest of the well site. The explosion resulted in the deaths of 11 crewmembers; 115 workers were safely rescued. The Deepwater Horizon was severely damaged from the explosions, fire, and resulting collapse into the Gulf of Mexico. Oil began to immediately gush into the gulf. Three weeks after the explosion, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) estimated 210,000 to 2,520,000 gallons of oil was being released into the gulf every day. Several weeks after the crisis began, CNN put a video camera at the bottom of the gulf to show the amount of oil entering the water and televised it 24 hours a day. Ultimately it would take 87 days to cap the oil rig.

The response to the environmental crisis was complex, because of the scope of the crisis, the coordination necessary among stakeholders and regulatory agencies, the difficulties and complexities associated in capping the oil rig, and the global attention that the environmental crisis attracted. The crisis communication was coordinated when the United States Coast Guard, the regulatory authority, and the Bureau of Energy Management formed a partnership with BP, the party responsible for responding to the crisis. The United States Coast Guard and BP were supported by 15 federal agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of the Interior, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to name a few. A Unified Area Command (UAC) managed the entire response. The UAC was comprised of four sectors. Each sector reported to the UAC. A critical part of the unified command structure is public information officers (PIOs). PIOs are charged with gathering and disseminating information to stakeholders during a crisis. They respond to media requests, craft messages for stakeholders, and coordinate communication among various agencies in the unified command structure. It is a complex communication job that is essential to an effective response and recovery operation during any type of crisis. Effective crisis communication skills are necessary for any public information officer.

Pyle (2011) interviewed several PIOs from the United States Coast Guard and BP involved in the response and recovery operations during the Deepwater Horizon crisis. The PIOs had keen insight into the communication that took place during the crisis. The PIOs reported that they wished they had developed a unified communication

plan or approach before the crisis or very early on during the event. However, the PIOs reported many goals or objectives in their crisis communication. Some PIOs explained that their goal was to get information out quickly, others tried to correct misinformation, while others suggested their goal was transparency. Other PIOs considered staying out in front of the crisis their primary goal.

Although many of the PIOs were brought into the crisis from many parts of the country and the world to support the massive communication needs during the crisis, they reported establishing relationships with stakeholders as critical to their response. They explained that working on functioning and developing collaboration within the ICS was critical to the unified command (Pyle, 2011). PIOs explained that the media, local communities, elected officials, the seafood industry, and frontline responders were all critical stakeholders during the crisis. To engage these stakeholders, they held open houses, creating opportunities for stakeholders to come to the incident command center for tours and to meet with subject matter experts to discuss wide-ranging topics related to the crisis.

A primary stakeholder for the PIOs was the media. The global media attention for this crisis was intense. PIOs suggested that the media was important to their crisis communication, because they were the primary way to get messages out to their stakeholders. However, they also discussed challenges in meeting the constant onslaught of media requests and the often aggressive questioning and demands for access, along with the divergent types of information requests they needed to respond to. They reported doing their absolute best to meet the needs of the media during the crisis. Although not perfect, PIOs provided unprecedented access to the crisis site and to key decision makers in the crisis. They reported being as accessible as possible, transparent, and did their best to correct misinformation in the media. However, the waves of media requests, the dynamic nature of the crisis, and the considerable amount of media made perfection difficult.

The PIOs reported providing as much information as possible to media and stakeholders about the crisis. In cases when they did not know the answer, they explained that they did not know. Some went further by working to try to find out the answer at a later time. However, the amount of questions and requests and changing nature of the crisis complicated the communication process. Several PIOs expressed that they should have countered media accounts that they felt were incorrect or were sensational. A large portion felt that their listening skills were essential to the crisis communication process. They explained that, rather than speculating what information people needed, they tried to listen and respond to the actual informational needs of their stakeholders. At times, this meant providing the information they had on hand at the time rather than speculating in their response. This was particularly true when discussing with response and recovery workers about any concerns they had about their health and safety during the crisis. The PIOs reported doing their best to meet the

needs of their stakeholders by having subject matter experts (SME) and health professionals answer questions for stakeholders in a clear and informative manner. This information was mostly conducted face-to-face. Other information about the crisis was most often provided in media releases, interviews, and through the website, http://restorethegulf.gov. The PIOs explained that they wanted to be more proactive in their communication. By being proactive, they could have provided more information about the cleanup process and discussed in more depth the engineering feats that were ultimately developed to cap the oil rig.

United States Coast Guard fire boats battle fire on Deepwater Horizon oil rig



Source: U.S. Coast Guard photo.

Summary

The BP oil spill was the largest response and recovery operation to an environmental disaster in United States history. The United States Coast Guard and BP coordinated the crisis communication for the event. This unusual and unprecedented relationship created a unique response and recovery operation that necessitated effective communication and coordination throughout the crisis. The PIOs who responded to the crisis experienced high demands for information, an often hostile and demanding communication context, and answers that were highly scientific and uncertain. The PIOs reported high levels of exhaustion during the crisis and expressed that future PIOs should monitor their rest and stress levels when engaging in crisis communication over an extended period of time.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time to determine how the PIOs involved in the BP oil spill communicated in the wake of the plant fire. First, take a moment to refresh in your mind the lessons established on effective crisis communication in Chapter 3. Second, note that these lessons serve as touchstones and discussion points for what we believe are key aspects of any crisis response. As you answer the questions that follow, consider whether the PIOs were effective or ineffective in their crisis communication. We have rephrased the lessons into questions so that you are better able to address the key issues in the case.

Lessons on Producing Effective Crisis Communication

Lesson 1: Determine your goals for crisis communication.
- What were the reported primary goals for PIOs in their crisis communication?

Lesson 2: Before a crisis, develop true equal partnerships with organizations and groups that are important to the organization.
- Had the PIOs developed partnerships with stakeholders prior to or during the crisis?

Lesson 3: Acknowledge your stakeholders, including the media, as partners when managing a crisis.
- Did the PIOs acknowledge stakeholders as partners in managing the crisis?

Lesson 4: Organizations need to develop strong, positive primary and secondary stakeholder relationships.
- Did the PIOs work toward positive relationships with primary and secondary stakeholders during the oil spill?

Lesson 5: Effective crisis communication involves listening to your stakeholders.
- Did the PIOs listen to or understand the needs of their stakeholders?

Lesson 6: Communicate early about the crisis, acknowledge uncertainty, and assure the public that you will maintain contact with them about current and future risk.
- Did the PIOs communicate regularly with stakeholders about the crisis?

Lesson 7: Avoid certain or absolute answers to the public and media until sufficient information is available.
- Did the PIOs communicate certain or absolute answers about the crisis?

Lesson 8: Do not overreassure stakeholders about the impact the crisis will have on them.
- Did the PIOs overreassure stakeholders about the impact of the crisis?

Lesson 9: The public needs useful and practical statements of self-efficacy during a crisis.
- Did the PIOs provide statements of self-efficacy following the crisis?

Lesson 10: Effective crisis communicators acknowledge that positive factors can arise from organizational crises.

- Did the PIOs acknowledge positive factors that resulted during the crisis?

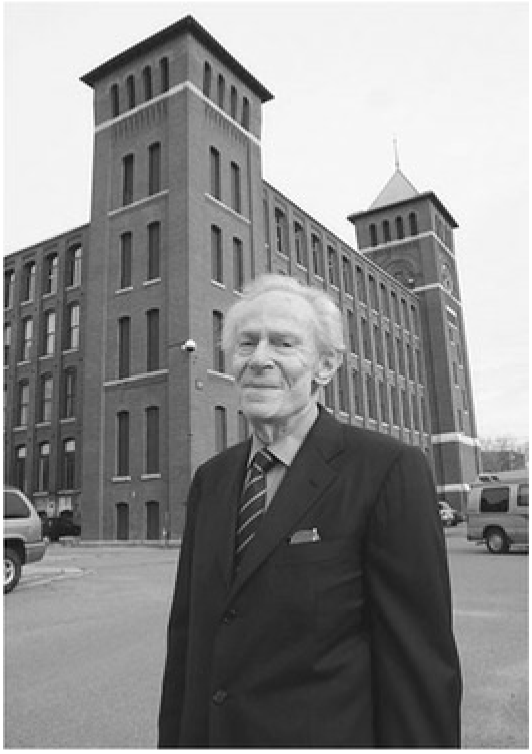
Example 4.2. A Plant Fire at Malden Mills

Malden Mills is a textile manufacturing plant located in Methuen, Massachusetts. The company has operated in the Merrimack Valley for over a century and is one of the few textile mills still located in New England—many of the other mills have left the area because of high wages and unions. However, Malden Mills has remained steadfast in its commitment to the community and pays some of the highest wages in the industry. It provides much of the economic base for the area, because it employs roughly 3,000 people. At the time of the fire, the company was privately owned by Aaron Feuerstein and had previously been owned by his father and his grandfather. The organization had been in the Feuerstein family for close to 100 years.

Crisis Preparation and Planning

The Feuerstein family had focused on developing strong relationships with their employees and customers. Feuerstein describes his leadership values as "sensitivity to the human equation" (Ulmer, 2001, p. 599). Paul Coorey, president of the local union, described Feuerstein as "fair and compassionate" and explained that he felt Feuerstein believed "that if you pay people a fair amount of money, and give them good benefits to take care of their families, they will produce for you" (Ulmer, 2001, p. 599).

Aaron Feuerstein in front of Malden Mills



Source: © Rick Friedman/Corbis.

Feuerstein illustrated his belief in treating workers fairly during the 1980s, when the company filed for bankruptcy. At the time, Malden Mills was selling fur and in the process of developing Polartec. Feuerstein went to the union to request layoffs until the company could return to profitability. In addition, Feuerstein promised that he would rehire those he laid off when the company returned to profitability. Many employees took that promise seriously and did not even look for other work. Feuerstein kept his promises and hired back all the workers whom he had laid off during the bankruptcy.

Beyond the workforce, Feuerstein also contributed to the community in which he operated. He sponsored job training programs, English-as-a-second-language programs, and generous lines of credit to local businesses. One owner of a local company ex-

plained Feuerstein's character by saying, "That's the kind of guy Aaron is. . . . If he's got half a loaf of bread, he is going to share it around" (Ulmer, 2001, p. 598). When a local synagogue caught fire, Feuerstein and his brother stepped forward and contributed $2 million to the rebuilding efforts. Over the years, Feuerstein consistently worked to establish strong relationships with his workers and the community.

Courageous Communication in the Wake of a Disaster

On December 11, 1995, the evening of Feuerstein's 70th birthday, his plant erupted into flames, burning for several days. Feuerstein immediately notified workers that he was going to rebuild the plant and keep it in Methuen and that he would pay workers full salaries and health benefits for 30 days while the plant was being rebuilt. He extended this benefit in total for 60 days and extended health benefits for 90 days or until the plant was rebuilt.

Within a day, the *Boston Globe* announced that "with one of his buildings still burning behind him, the 69-year-old owner of Malden Mills . . . spoke the words everyone in the Merrimack Valley wanted to hear" (Milne & Aucoin, 1995, p. B1). Feuerstein declared that "we are going to continue to contribute in Lawrence. . . . We had the opportunity to run to the south many years ago. We didn't do it then and we're not going to do it now" (Milne & Aucoin, 1995, p. B1).

Three days after the fire, Feuerstein held a meeting at a local high school. At this time, he declared that "at least for the next 30 days—the time might be longer—all hourly employees will be paid their full salaries" (Milne, 1995, p. B50). One month after the crisis, Feuerstein met with workers again. At this time he announced,

> I am happy to announce to you that we will once again—for at least 30 days more—pay all of our employees. And why am I doing it? I consider the employees standing in front of me here the most valuable asset that Malden Mills has. I don't consider them as some companies do as an expense that can be cut. What I am doing today will come back tenfold and it will make Malden Mills the best company in the industry. (Calo, 1996)

Over the remainder of the crisis, Feuerstein consistently met with workers and paid salaries and benefits. Two months after the crisis, 70% of workers were back on the job. At that time, Feuerstein agreed to pay salaries and benefits for the remaining 800 workers for another 30 days. At the end of this time, he paid health insurance for an additional 90 days for those still not back at the company and promised jobs for those unemployed, similar to his actions in the 1980s.

Summary

Aaron Feuerstein was universally praised for his compassionate response to the 1995 plant fire at Malden Mills. President Clinton commended Mr. Feuerstein's crisis communication in his State of the Union Address. In addition, Malden Mills received donations from around the world for several years after the fire. At the time of the crisis, Aaron Feuerstein appeared to be less concerned about the cause of the crisis or responsibility and more concerned with those most impacted by the crisis: his employees and the community. After the fire, Feuerstein communicated immediately and worked to move beyond the crisis. He gave his workers and the community hope and faith that the company would overcome this crisis. In addition, he was able to solidify and further develop the stakeholder relationships he had worked so hard to establish before the fire.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time to determine how Aaron Feuerstein communicated in the wake of the plant fire. First, take a moment to refresh in your mind the lessons established on effective crisis communication in Chapter 3. Second, note that these lessons serve as touchstones and discussion points for what we believe are key aspects of any crisis response. As you answer the questions that follow, consider whether Aaron Feuerstein was effective or ineffective in his crisis communication. We have rephrased the lessons into questions so that you are better able to address the key issues in the case.

Lessons on Producing Effective Crisis Communication

Lesson 1: Determine your goals for crisis communication.

- What were Aaron Feuerstein's primary goals in his crisis communication?

Lesson 2: Before a crisis, develop true equal partnerships with organizations and groups that are important to the organization.

- How did Aaron Feuerstein develop partnerships with stakeholders prior to the crisis?

Lesson 3: Acknowledge your stakeholders, including the media, as partners when managing a crisis.

- In what ways did Aaron Feuerstein acknowledge his stakeholders as partners in managing the crisis?

Lesson 4: Organizations need to develop strong, positive primary and secondary stakeholder relationships.

- In what ways did Aaron Feuerstein work toward positive relationships with primary and secondary stakeholders following the fire?

Lesson 5: Effective crisis communication involves listening to your stakeholders.

- What evidence is there that Aaron Feuerstein listened to or understood the needs of his stakeholders?

Lesson 6: Communicate early about the crisis, acknowledge uncertainty, and assure the public that you will maintain contact with them about current and future risk.

- How and how often did Aaron Feuerstein communicate to stakeholders about the crisis?

Lesson 7: Avoid certain or absolute answers to the public and media until sufficient information is available.

- Did Aaron Feuerstein communicate certain or absolute answers about the cause of the crisis?

Lesson 8: Do not overreassure stakeholders about the impact the crisis will have on them.

- Is there evidence that Aaron Feuerstein overreassured stakeholders about the impact of the crisis?

Lesson 9: The public needs useful and practical statements of self-efficacy dur-

ing a crisis.

- How did Aaron Feuerstein provide statements of self-efficacy following the crisis?

Lesson 10: Effective crisis communicators acknowledge that positive factors can arise from organizational crises.

- In what ways did Aaron Feuerstein acknowledge positive factors that could arise as a result of the plant fire?

Example 4.3. Long-Term Complexities in the Tainted Odwalla Apple Juice CRISIS

Odwalla, a producer of juice and other products intended for health-conscious consumers, began a long and complicated process of crisis recovery on October 30, 1996. On that date, the company was notified of a link between its unpasteurized apple juice and an outbreak of *E. coli*. Odwalla voluntarily began a recall immediately on learning of the problem and willingly expanded its recall to include 12 other juices. Sadly, despite these efforts, the outbreak eventually took the life of a 16-month-old girl and seriously sickened 60 other children. In response to the crisis, Odwalla made substantial changes, pledging to make consumer safety foremost in its production processes. Many observers lauded this immediate response. In fact, Odwalla retained 80% of its accounts in the wake of the crisis ("Odwalla, Inc.," 1997).

Challenges for Multiple Stakeholders

Odwalla's crisis response, which we detail below, had a profound impact on a variety of stakeholders (Reierson, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2009). Prior to the crisis, producers assumed that the acid in juice products would naturally destroy bacteria such as *E. coli* without pasteurization. The Odwalla outbreak inspired major changes in this way of thinking. New pasteurization techniques requiring additional equipment became the norm in the industry. Not all producers could afford such equipment. Odwalla's investors also shared in the loss mightily during the company's long and costly recovery. In addition, the recall and subsequent investigation led to layoffs—causing financial hardship for many employees. Keep these stakeholders in mind as you read the following description of Odwalla's response to its *E. coli* crisis.

Odwalla's Crisis Response

From the start, Odwalla displayed a clear and impressive commitment to its customers. In addition to voluntarily recalling products and shutting down operations, Odwalla opened new lines of communication with its customers. The company launched a website dedicated to the crisis within 24 hours and created two 1-800 telephone numbers for customers and suppliers to call. Odwalla's message to consumers was clear, consistent, and compassionate. The company shared its regret for the incident and offered refunds to those who had recently purchased its products. Odwalla also offered to pay medical costs for illnesses resulting from their contaminated juice (Martinelli & Briggs, 1998). Odwalla's chairperson at the time of the crisis, Greg Steltenpohl, visited family members of sickened children and publicly acknowledged the pain and suffering the crisis had caused (Thomsen & Rawson, 1998). When the lone death caused by the crisis occurred, the company issued a press release offering condolences to her family.

Within two months of the crisis, Odwalla announced a revolutionary change in the production of fresh juice products. The company introduced flash pasteurization as a technique it insisted would destroy *E. coli* bacteria while maintaining much of the flavor and nutritional value that was present in its unpasteurized products (Martinelli & Briggs, 1998). Odwalla has not experienced another major recall since adopting flash pasteurization in 1996.

The new pasteurization process at Odwalla



Source: Photo courtesy of The Creamery at Pineland Farms.

Impact on Stakeholders

As mentioned at the outset of this case study, Odwalla was able to maintain the majority of its accounts after the crisis. The *Wall Street Journal* quoted one public relations and crisis specialist who proclaimed that Odwalla's "core principles have brought them back to probably one of the quickest recoveries in history" (Moore, 1998, para. 15). This recovery was not without cost for some of Odwalla's stakeholders. Small operators in the juice industry, investors, and some Odwalla employees all suffered during and after Odwalla's crisis response.

At the time of the crisis, Odwalla was a relatively large producer in the fresh juice industry. Consequently, the company had the financial wherewithal to retool its facility with flash pasteurization equipment. Not all producers could afford this advancement. Once Odwalla announced it was using flash pasteurization, some grocery store chains such as Safeway were no longer willing to accept juice from others unless they too adopted flash pasteurization (Martinelli & Briggs, 1998). Small operators who did undertake flash pasteurization were forced to raise their prices, thereby diminishing their competitiveness (De Lisser, 1998).

Odwalla's investors were also hurt by the crisis. Odwalla spent money aggressively during its recovery despite plummeting profits. In addition, Odwalla was fined more than a million dollars for the crisis ("Odwalla pleads," 1998). As Reierson et al. (2009) observe, "although Odwalla's actions might have been good business practice in the long run, immediately following the crisis investors were left with little to show for their original investment" (p. 122).

Odwalla's employees also suffered during the crisis. Sixty Odwalla employees were laid off in the aftermath. Although consumers were compensated as a result of the crisis, little was done to support Odwalla's employees during the crisis recovery. Several members of Odwalla's board of directors were also replaced after the crisis.

Odwalla's crisis response was decisive and effective in returning the company to profitability in the long run. This response, however, was not without cost to at least three sets of stakeholders: small operators, investors, and employees.

Summary

Odwalla's recovery from its *E. coli* crisis was celebrated as an exemplar of excellence in crisis communication. Indeed, Odwalla communicated early and often with its consumers, showing remorse for the crisis and offering financial compensation. A closer look at the crisis, however, reveals lingering harm to small producers in the industry. Investors unable to stay with Odwalla for the long term also suffered significant financial losses. Similarly, some employees lost their jobs, at least temporarily, causing financial stress. This case provides clear evidence of the need for organizations to consider all stakeholders for the long term when developing a crisis response.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time to determine whether Odwalla communicated effectively with the stakeholders involved in the crisis. First, take a moment to refresh in your mind the lessons established in Chapter 3 for communicating effectively and ineffectively during crises. These lessons should guide you in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of Odwalla's crisis response. As you contemplate the questions that follow, consider whether Odwalla was effective or ineffective in coping with the long-term complexities of the crisis.

Lessons on Producing Effective Crisis Communication

Lesson 1: Determine your goals for crisis communication.
- Did Odwalla exemplify clear goals in its crisis communication?

Lesson 2: Before a crisis, develop true equal partnerships with organizations and groups that are important to the organization.
- In what ways did Odwalla develop partnerships with stakeholders?

Lesson 3: Acknowledge your stakeholders, including the media, as partners when managing a crisis.
- How did Odwalla acknowledge its stakeholders following the crisis?

Lesson 4: Organizations need to develop strong, positive primary and secondary stakeholder relationships.
- Is there evidence that Odwalla established relationships with its stakeholders?

Lesson 5: Effective crisis communication involves listening to your stakeholders.
- Is there evidence that Odwalla listened to its stakeholders?

Lesson 6: Communicate early about the crisis, acknowledge uncertainty, and assure the public that you will maintain contact with them about current and future risk.
- In what ways did Odwalla maintain contact with the public?

Lesson 7: Avoid certain or absolute answers to the public and media until sufficient information is available.
- Did Odwalla provide certain or absolute answers about the cause of the crisis?

Lesson 8: Do not overreassure stakeholders about the impact the crisis will have on them.
- Did Odwalla overreassure about the impact of the crisis?

Lesson 9: The public needs useful and practical statements of self-efficacy during a crisis.
- In what way did Odwalla provide statements of self-efficacy following the crisis?

Lesson 10: Effective crisis communicators acknowledge that positive factors can arise from organizational crises.
- Was there evidence that positive factors could arise from this crisis?

Example 4.4. What's in a Name? Beef Products Incorporated Face "Pink Slime"

Lean finely textured beef (LFTB) has been blended into some ground hamburger by food processors and grocery stores in the United States for two decades. Despite no documented health risks and no ethical missteps by the product's manufacturer, LFTB was, in 2012, suddenly and seriously discredited in the eyes of many consumers. The result was a full-blown crisis for Beef Products Incorporated (BPI), a primary manufacturer of LFTB. How could a crisis develop for a company that creates a safe product about which consumers generally knew nothing? The answer is a single news broadcast on ABC nightly news labeled LFTB pink slime and questioned the safety and ethics of its use.

The ABC nightly news program began with the anchor of the primetime ABC News broadcast introducing the story as a "startling ABC News investigation." LFTB was described as a filler used to pad the content of ground hamburger with a dangerous product contaminated with ammonia. Use of the product was further described in the story as an act of "economic fraud." Most damaging of all, the ABC News reporter introduced the term pink slime as an alternate name for LFTB. The use of this phrase creates feelings of disgust and queasiness in hearers. The phrase pink slime is also vivid and memorable. Thus, ABC News created a negative exemplar by using the phrase pink slime in its newscast. We discussed the seriousness of exemplars in Chapter Two. Use of the revolting phrase continued in subsequent ABC News stories, was picked up by reporters from other news organizations, and became a social media meme. The phrase pink slime implied that otherwise pure ground beef was being diluted by a grotesque and unsafe product to enhance the profits of restaurants and grocery stores.

A Third Party Crisis Response

The fallout from the pink slime characterization was severe. The phrase created consumer repugnance and outrage toward LFTB that led to the United States Department of Agriculture allowing participants in the National School Lunch Program to specify the purchase of beef products without LFTB, and grocery store chains such as Safeway, SuperValu, Food Lion, and Kroger pledged to stop selling ground beef that included LFTB. Ultimately, the dwindling demand for LFGB caused BPI to suspend production at three of its four processing plants, laying off 650 employees (Green, 2012).

BPI responded to the accusations with press releases and a website clarifying the nature and use of LFTB. Because the company supplied an ingredient instead of an end product purchased by consumers, however, BPI had a limited public relations network. As the crisis wore on, BPI benefited from the actions of other stakeholders in the beef industry. One of these benefits was receiving endorsements from organizations such as the North American Meat Institute (known as the American Meat Institute during the crisis). The mission of the North American Meat Institute (NAMI) is, "To be a catalyst for continuous innovation and improvement; a strong advocate for the meat and poultry community before consumers, policymakers and media; and a vehicle for members of all sizes to develop positive, constructive and long lasting relationships" (NAMI, n.d., para. 5). For BPI, NAMI provided the benefits of a credible third party, countering the claims introduced by ABC News. For example, NAMI created a video, similar in format to the ABC News story, presenting a series of facts about LFTB that contrasted with ABC NEW's claims. The facts in the NAMI video included the following:

- LFTB is 100% beef. The pink color and the gelatin consistency of the product occur because the meat, extracted close to the bone after choice cuts are already taken, is heated and spun to remove all fat.
- Because all fat is removed, adding LFTB reduces the fat content and raises the protein level of ground beef.
- The levels of ammonia used in the creation of LFTB are similar to those naturally occurring in many commonly eaten foods.

At the peak of the pink slime crisis, sales of LFTB were down 80%. The response of third party stakeholders such as NAMI and the rising cost of hamburger, however, have led to a partial recovery for the product. Sales are still not to their former levels, but food processors of such products as canned lasagna and spaghetti sauce are making regular use of LFTB. Sales in this area continue to rise. Many supermarkets that stopped selling ground hamburger with LFTB, however, still do not sell the product (Russell, 2014).

Summary

The lean finely textured beef case offers a poignant answer to the question, "What's in a name?" Labeling LFTB as pink slime set in motion a series of events that put people out of work, lowered the protein level in many beef products, and diverted attention from greater food safety risks. The case also emphasizes the added challenge organizations face when they have little interaction with the public. As the manufacturer of an ingredient rather than an end product, BPI was basically a hidden or invisible organization to consumers. This case emphasizes the need for similar organizations who spend little or no time in the public eye to consider how they would communicate during a crisis.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time for you to determine if BPI and NAMI communicated effectively with the many stakeholders involved in the crisis. Did their communication provide a sense of false certainty? Was clear, honest, and open communication practiced? First, take a moment to refresh in your mind the lessons established in Chapter 3. These lessons should guide you in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of communication within the LFTB crisis. As you contemplate the questions that follow, consider whether BPI and NAMI were effective or ineffective in coping with the added constraints they faced during the crisis response.

Lessons on Producing Effective Crisis Communication

Lesson 1: Determine your goals for crisis communication.

- What were the primary goals BPI and NAMI pursued in their crisis communication?

Lesson 2: Before a crisis, develop true equal partnerships with organizations and groups that are important to the organization.

- How was the opportunity for BPI and NAMI to partner with the media limited by the fact that ABC News created the crisis?

Lesson 3: Acknowledge your stakeholders, including the media, as partners when managing a crisis.

- How was the opportunity for BPI and NAMI to partner with the media limited by the fact that ABC News created the crisis?

Lesson 4: Organizations need to develop strong, positive primary and secondary stakeholder relationships.

- Who were the primary and secondary stakeholders that were addressed by BPI and NAMI?

Lesson 5: Effective crisis communication involves listening to your stakeholders.

- Did BPI and NAMI listen to their stakeholders effectively?

Lesson 6: Communicate early about the crisis, acknowledge uncertainty, and assure the public that you will maintain contact with them about current and future risk.

- What did BPI and NAMI do to acknowledge uncertainty about LFTB during the crisis?

Lesson 7: Avoid certain or absolute answers to the public and media until sufficient information is available.

- Was sufficient information available when NAMI responded to the crisis on behalf of BPI?

Lesson 8: Do not overreassure stakeholders about the impact the crisis will have on them.

- Did BPI and NAMI overreassure consumers about LFTB?

Lesson 9: The public needs useful and practical statements of self-efficacy during a crisis.

- What kind of advice did BPI and NAMI give to consumers during the

crisis?

Lesson 10: Effective crisis communicators acknowledge that positive factors can arise from organizational crises.

- What kinds of positive outcomes came out of the LFTB crisis, and how could these be used to prepare for future crises?

Plant Tour



Source: AP Photo/Nati Harnik

Example 4.5. Rural Renewal After a Tornado in Greensburg, Kansas

On May 4, 2007, the roughly 1,500 residents of Greensburg, Kansas, were struck by an EF5 tornado, which killed 11 people and demolished 95% of the buildings in the city. Greensburg is located roughly 100 miles south of Wichita in South Central Kansas. The tornado was one of the largest and most violent ever recorded. Estimates suggest the tornado was 1.7 miles wide and produced winds of over 200 miles per hour. Survivors were left without housing, running water, or electricity. The tornado literally swept away the homes, schools, and churches in Greensburg. Before the tornado, the city was known for its strong sense of community and for housing the largest hand-dug well, which served as a tourist attraction for those passing through the town. However, like many rural towns, Greensburg was slowly losing population, because locals left for larger cities and children went to college never to come back. After the devastating tornado, residents of Greensburg were beginning to consider a new identity for their resilient Midwestern town.

Initial Framing of the Crisis

Following the devastating tornado, there was a real sense of loss. Citizens were stunned by the impact of the tornado and were uncertain about what would happen to their community. However, almost immediately, key leaders in the community saw the potential to frame the disaster positively for its citizens. For instance, Greensburg City Administrator Steve Hewitt lost his home and everything he owned. However, he also felt the "the tornado had a silver lining, for it made this town and some 1,400 people regroup and reinvent itself" (Nguyen & Morris, 2009, para. 2). He explained further that "it forced people to make a change. It forced people to say, You know what—we have an opportunity unlike any other community gets" (Nguyen & Morris, 2009, para. 3). In this case, Steve Hewitt began to see a tabula rasa from which to recreate and reinvent the town of Greensburg.

Less than two days after the tornado, as the wreckage was being excavated from local buildings, School Superintendent Darren Hedrick provided a similar description to Steve Hewitt's of how Greensburg could capitalize on the effect of the disaster. He explained, "Towns are about people, they are not about buildings. And it's a huge opportunity to rebuild—not just rebuild it the way it was but maybe rebuild it a little bit better than it was" (Morris, 2007, para. 4).

These initial thoughts and communication by leaders began to instigate conversations by citizens through community forums held periodically to discuss the recovery process, including any problems or frustrations that people were experiencing. Because most people were living in FEMA trailers and were anxious to move into more permanent housing, developing a plan for moving forward was very important. However, through community forums, people began to talk about the disaster as a way to reinvigorate the town and solve the problem of its declining population. These people hoped to "reverse the trend. To not lose the kids, but to bring our kids back. To invest back in the community so that after they graduate they can have new jobs and new opportunities" (Nguyen & Morris, 2009, para. 4). In doing so, "the tornado was something that bonded people, which . . . is a natural element of shared adversity, and the community was able to tap into that in a big way" (Phelps, 2009, para. 21).

The Greensburg City Council met regularly to discuss what businesses would continue to do business in Greensburg and when they would be reopening. This group also led many of the community forums and listened to the concerns and frustrations about the uncertain future that current residents faced. However, through city council meetings and community forums, a vision of creating a green city that could be a model for the entire world of energy conservation began to emerge. Danny Wallach, who headed a nonprofit group leading the push for environmental sustainability in Greensburg, began rallying residents to consider making Greensburg an example of

what an energy- and environmentally sound community could be. He explained, “I mean, it literally struck me, green—Greensburg—and at the time, I wasn’t aware of just how perfect the timing in the national green movement was” (Morris, 2007, para. 14). Steve Hewitt said that Greensburg could come back stronger than ever. “Before the tornado, Greensburg was shedding 2% of its population every year. Those who left for college rarely returned to stay. It was a death by a thousand cuts” (Morris, 2007, para. 22). The leadership of the community began to see the potential and opportunity that the crisis created. Ultimately, these early visions and discussions led to the Greensburg City Council resolving that all new city buildings should meet the very highest environmental standard—LEED platinum” (Morris, 2007, para. 23).

Consequences of a Bold Environmental Vision Following the Tornado

Steve Hewitt was thinking big after the disaster. He focused on creating "office space for new businesses, a high school and an art center designed to be LEED platinum" (Morris, 2007, para. 23). He explained that building a green community would not be easy. "Maybe it's a little bit crazy. There are only 14 platinum buildings in the country. When it's all said and done, I'd like 4 or 5 here in Greensburg" (Morris, 2007, para. 25). When word got out about the vision Greensburg had created, several unintended outcomes developed. The Discovery Channel began filming a television series called *Greensburg Eco-Town* and ultimately created a television series called *Greensburg: A Story of Community Rebuilding,* which chronicled the entire renewal process.

By 2009, Greensburg was well on its way to becoming "a green community of the future . . . making Greensburg a national model for environmentally conscious living" (Nguyen & Morris, 2009, para. 5).

- Greensburg developed a series of eco-homes to educate people about energy-efficient construction. The eco-homes feature ground source heating and cooling, solar hot water, and even vegetable gardens on the roofs. They are about 70% more energy efficient than the average house and have been tested for safety in the event of future tornadoes (Nguyen & Morris, 2009).
- Greensburg developed buildings with solid concrete, using more natural light, and with better insulation and state-of-the-art windows.
- The community developed solar and wind technologies to harness power and geothermal heat.
- The town's John Deere dealership created a state-of-the-art, energy efficient facility, by employing oil and heat to cool its floors and wind turbines to power the building. The owner believes he will save $25,000 a year with these improvements (Nguyen & Morris, 2009).

Community Response

It appears that Greensburg's approach to interpret the crisis as an opportunity to reinvigorate the town has been effective. School superintendent Hedrick explains, "A lot of towns are dying a slow death. We had a fork put in us pretty hard. We have to find a way to resurrect and we hope we're making good decisions to do that" (Morris, 2007). Fifteen-year-old Levi Schmidt described the recovery this way: "Before the tornado, I was not going to come back. I was going to go to college, and who knows where. This community was dying. Now I'm definitely coming back, and I know a good majority of my friends are" (Morris, 2007, para. 34). This certainly does not mean that everyone stayed following the tornado but does suggest that Greensburg is able, for the time being, to stem the tide of its decline in population. For more information on this case, take a look at the Greensburg, Kansas, website: www.greensburgks.org. The new slogan on the home page of the town's website reads *Greensburg: Better, Stronger, Greener!* (Nguyen & Morris, 2009).

A view of the devastation in Greensburg, Kansas, following the tornado



Source: Greg Henshall/FEMA/Wikimedia.

Summary

The 2007 tornado in Greensburg, Kansas, caught everyone by surprise. The leadership in Greensburg quickly considered the potential opportunities associated with the disaster and framed it this way for citizens. This new prospective vision focused on making Greensburg a model of environmentally sensitive building and housing and set a plan for moving Greensburg forward. Greensburg engaged environmentally savvy stakeholders to help it create its vision and support its relief efforts. Through effective communication, Greensburg, Kansas, was able to effectively respond to a dramatic and tragic crisis.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time to determine whether the leadership of Greensburg, Kansas, communicated effectively with the many stakeholders involved in the crisis. First, take a moment to refresh in your mind the lessons established in Chapter 3 on communicating effectively and ineffectively during crises. These lessons should guide you in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of Greensburg's crisis response. As you contemplate the questions that follow, consider whether the leadership of Greensburg was effective or ineffective in coping with the added constraints it faced during its crisis response.

Lessons on Producing Effective Crisis Communication

Lesson 1: Determine your goals for crisis communication.

- In what ways did Greensburg leaders illustrate clear goals in their crisis communication?

Lesson 2: Before a crisis, develop true equal partnerships with organizations and groups that are important to the organization.

- Did relationships established before the tornado aid in Greensburg's response?

Lesson 3: Acknowledge your stakeholders, including the media, as partners when managing a crisis.

- In what ways did Greensburg leaders include stakeholders in their renewal efforts?

Lesson 4: Organizations need to develop strong, positive primary and secondary stakeholder relationships.

- In what ways did Greensburg leaders establish new stakeholder relationships that helped them create the new vision for their town?

Lesson 5: Effective crisis communication involves listening to your stakeholders.

- Did the leadership of Greensburg include residents in decision making about the new vision for the town?

Lesson 6: Communicate early about the crisis, acknowledge uncertainty, and assure the public that you will maintain contact with them about current and future risk.

- How and how often did Greensburg leadership communicate with the public about the crisis?

Lesson 7: Avoid certain or absolute answers to the public and media until sufficient information is available.

- Did Greensburg leaders communicate with excessive certainty about the crisis?

Lesson 8: Do not overreassure stakeholders about the impact the crisis will have on them.

- Did Greensburg leaders overreassure about the potential for renewal following the crisis?

Lesson 9: The public needs useful and practical statements of self-efficacy dur-

ing a crisis.

- Did Greensburg leaders communicate statements of self-efficacy following the crisis?

Lesson 10: Effective crisis communicators acknowledge that positive factors can arise from organizational crises.

- In what ways did leaders in the Greensburg community acknowledge that positive factors could arise as a result of the crisis?

Example 4.6. A Costly YouTube Hoax for Domino's Pizza

The simple combination of a video camera, two unsupervised restaurant employees with vulgar senses of humor, and access to the video sharing website YouTube created a cascade of problems for Domino's Pizza, Inc. In April of 2009, two Domino's employees, Kristy Hammonds and Michael Setzer, both in their 30s, posted a grotesque video to YouTube. The two created the video in the kitchen of a Domino's franchise located in Conover, North Carolina. In the video, Hammonds narrates as Setzer is seen violating standard health codes by intentionally contacting food with several of his orifices. Although the video was truly disgusting and juvenile, it piqued the interest of the online community. The video, seen by nearly a million viewers before it was taken down, created a public relations and financial crisis for Domino's (Clifford, 2009).

Unusual Challenges for Domino's

The Domino's YouTube crisis created two unusual challenges. First, the crisis was created by a hoax. Second, the perpetrators used a social media outlet to publicize their mischief. We will discuss each of these challenges individually.

Hoaxes, by their nature, create contradicting demands for organizations. Hoaxes begin with an accusation against an organization. In this case, the hoaxers, Setzer and Hammonds, falsely claimed to have served the food that had been contaminated by Setzer. Even if an organization suspects that the claims are false, as was the case with the Domino's hoax, the organization must take every precaution against the threat at hand and display a capacity for dealing with similar threats that may occur in the future. Thus, organizations must simultaneously

- argue they have a plan in place, either pre-established or spontaneously generated, that can mitigate or manage any crisis emerging from the threat; and
- scrutinize available evidence in order to recognize and refute false claims at the earliest point possible (Sellnow, Littlefield, Vidoloff, & Webb, 2010, p. 142).

For Domino's, the primary objectives were to emphasize its commitment to food safety and hiring reputable staff, while discrediting the claims brought against the organization in the YouTube video.

Domino's second challenge was caused by the popularity and accessibility of YouTube. Awareness of the hoax video spread in a virtually exponential manner. Within hours, thousands saw the video. Within two days, that number climbed to a million. Even after YouTube agreed to remove the video from its site, the video was posted and made accessible by bloggers at a variety of alternative sites. For Domino's, the challenge was to gain control of a story that proliferated extensively overnight and did so completely independent of the standard media sources, such as television and newspapers.

Patrick Doyle



Source: ZUMA Press, Inc./Alamy Stock Photo

Domino's Crisis Response

This case accentuates the need for organizations to monitor social media to detect potential crisis situations. Domino's was ineffective in such monitoring. In fact, Domino's did not detect the video on its own. Rather, a blogger alerted the company to the condemning video. Domino's initially failed to grasp the urgency of the situation. The company first responded with standard press releases denying that the company had served contaminated food. Unfortunately, this routine response failed to account for the fact that the crisis emerged on a social media site. Consequently, many who viewed the hoax video never saw Domino's initial response. The company did not provide a formal statement from Domino's USA President Patrick Doyle until 48 hours after realizing the video was on YouTube. During this lapse of time, bloggers speculated openly about Domino's credibility and capacity for managing the crisis (Levinsohn & Gibson, 2009).

Domino's spokesperson Tim McIntyre expressed his dismay as the crisis unfolded in a conversation with the *New York Times.* "We got blindsided by two idiots with a video camera and an awful idea," McIntyre said (Clifford, 2009, p. 1B). "Even people who've been with us as loyal customers for 10, 15, 20 years, people are second-guessing their relationship with Domino's, and that's not fair," he lamented (Clifford, 2009, p. 1B).

With their reputation reeling, Domino's did what it had never done before—address a crisis situation via a social media site. Dressed in a shirt with an open collar, Doyle read a two-minute crisis response seated in front of a single camera. The statement was straightforward and apologetic. Doyle began by saying, "We sincerely apologize for this incident. We thank members of the online community who quickly alerted us and allowed us to take immediate action. Although the individuals in question claim it's a hoax, we are taking this incredibly seriously." Doyle also indicated that the facility in Conover had been temporarily closed and thoroughly disinfected. After claiming that customer trust is "sacred" to Domino's, Doyle vowed to reexamine the company's hiring practices to "make sure people like this don't make it into our stores." Doyle ended the video by saying he was "sickened" by the damage this incident had done to the Domino's brand and the harm it had done to the reputation of the company's 125,000 employees worldwide (Domino's president, n.d.).

News of Doyle's YouTube response spread quickly. His message was viewed extensively, and many of the websites that had criticized Domino's for its slow and routine response offered critiques of the video—some favorable, some unfavorable. Unlike Domino's initial effort, the YouTube apology garnered the much-needed attention that had been missing. *Business Week* heralded the Domino's response as a lesson for all major companies, saying, "If there's a lesson here, experts say, it's that companies

must have an active presence on the web—to monitor their brands continuously, perhaps enlisting loyal customers to help deal immediately with any damage" (Levinsohn & Gibson, 2009, p. 15). Another lesson from this case concerns the communication approach that organizations select for their crisis communication. Clearly, using standard press releases through traditional media venues did not reach the audience of the hoax video. Not until Doyle communicated through the same medium selected by the hoaxers was he able to reach his relevant audience.

Summary

The Domino's case offers valuable lessons for responding to hoaxes. First, hoaxes can cause notable damage to an organization's financial well-being. The YouTube incident caused extensive damage to Domino's brand and to consumer confidence. Second, responding to hoaxes is complex. Organizations must, at once, discredit the hoaxers while establishing that the company takes all such threats seriously. At times, this type of crisis places an organization in a seemingly contradictory position. Third, the Domino's case clearly exemplifies the increasing importance of alternative media such as YouTube in preventing and managing crises. Organizations would be wise to study the Domino's case and consider their own levels of preparedness for such an attack.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time to determine whether Domino's communicated effectively with the stakeholders involved in the crisis. First, take a moment to refresh in your mind the lessons established in Chapter 3 for communicating effectively and ineffectively during crises. These lessons should guide you in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of Domino's crisis response. As you contemplate the questions that follow, consider whether Domino's was effective or ineffective in coping with the added constraints of the hoax and the use of social media it faced during its crisis response.

Lessons on Producing Effective Crisis Communication

Lesson 1: Determine your goals for crisis communication.
- Did Domino's exemplify clear goals in its crisis communication?

Lesson 2: Before a crisis, develop true equal partnerships with organizations and groups that are important to the organization.
- In what ways did Domino's develop partnerships with stakeholders?

Lesson 3: Acknowledge your stakeholders, including the media, as partners when managing a crisis.
- How did Domino's acknowledge its stakeholders following the crisis?

Lesson 4: Organizations need to develop strong, positive primary and secondary stakeholder relationships.
- Is there evidence that Domino's established relationships with its stakeholders?

Lesson 5: Effective crisis communication involves listening to your stakeholders.
- Is there evidence that Domino's listened to its stakeholders?

Lesson 6: Communicate early about the crisis, acknowledge uncertainty, and assure the public that you will maintain contact with them about current and future risk.
- In what ways did Domino's maintain contact with the public?

Lesson 7: Avoid certain or absolute answers to the public and media until sufficient information is available.
- Did Domino's provide certain or absolute answers about the cause of the crisis?

Lesson 8: Do not overreassure stakeholders about the impact the crisis will have on them.
- Did Domino's overreassure about the impact of the crisis?

Lesson 9: The public needs useful and practical statements of self-efficacy during a crisis.
- In what way did Domino's provide statements of self-efficacy following the crisis?

Lesson 10: Effective crisis communicators acknowledge that positive factors can arise from organizational crises.
- Was there evidence that positive factors could arise from this crisis?

5 Lessons on Managing Crisis Uncertainty Effectively

Every crisis carries with it some level of uncertainty. Following a crisis, questions often surface about how to communicate during the uncertainty of a crisis. Whether the crisis is a natural disaster, a food-borne illness outbreak, or a plant explosion, a crisis communicator has to manage uncertainty. Consider that the cases in the last chapter, BP and the United States Coast Guard; Malden Mills; Odwalla; the accusations about lean finely textured beef; the tornado in Greensburg, Kansas; and Dominos, all experienced high levels of uncertainty during their crises. Uncertainty makes communicating complex, because the crisis communicators must speak publicly without always having clear or accurate information. This chapter, then, provides some highly specialized approaches that go beyond effective crisis communication to meet the needs of high uncertainty crises. Our goal in this chapter is to provide some constructive advice about how to communicate in the presence of uncertainty. We identify 10 lessons for effectively managing the uncertainty of crisis that can serve as guideposts for both students and practitioners of crisis communication.

To provide a quick overview of the chapter, we begin by providing a definition of uncertainty and discussing its link to our initial definition of crisis. The first four lessons characterize uncertainty as an expected challenge early during crises for crisis communicators. The next six lessons focus on proven communication strategies for changing uncertainty from a challenge to an opportunity. We conclude with a discussion of communication strategies that we believe either intensify or reduce the inherent uncertainty of crisis events. After reading this chapter, you should be better able to transform the constraints of uncertainty into opportunities.

Defining Uncertainty

Uncertainty is the inability to determine the present or predict the future. Kramer (2004) suggests, "We may experience uncertainty due to lack of information, due to the complexity of the information, or due to questions about the quality of the information" (pp. 8–9).

We live in a world constrained by uncertainty. Uncertainty is a common experience regardless of your position in life, your job, or your age. For students, there is uncertainty about their next semester courses, their grades, and their futures. Organizations also experience uncertainty. They must plan for market upturns and downturns and try to predict, in a fickle market, what products or services their customers will purchase.

Crisis-induced uncertainty is quite different from the type of uncertainty people and organizations experience on a daily basis. To better understand the scope of crisis uncertainty, we illustrate its role through our definition of crisis discussed in Chapter 1. We defined crisis as an unexpected, nonroutine event that threatens the ultimate goals of the organization. Uncertainty is related to each of the elements of this definition and exemplifies the communication demands during crisis. Taleb (2010) explains that crises often create epistemological and ontological uncertainty. He defines *epistemological uncertainty* as the lack of knowledge we have following a crisis. Because crisis events are so new, complex, and subject to change, there is often little knowledge available about how to manage them. For this reason, crises often create gaps in knowledge for extended periods of time that constrain decision making and understanding. *Ontological uncertainty* refers to the type of uncertainty in which the future has little or no relationship to the past. Crisis events are often described as creating a new normal for all impacted by the event. This new normal is highly uncertain, because people's beliefs about how the world operates change dramatically. Consider the new normal we experienced following 9/11 regarding airport security. As a society, we knew there would be changes; in the time that has passed since 9/11 there has been—and still is—considerable debate, discussion, and uncertainty about what this new normal will ultimately look like.

Unexpected Crises and Uncertainty

Crises happen when least expected, are shocking, and create a great deal of uncertainty for everyone concerned. To better understand the unexpected nature of crises, consider the Malden Mills case from the last chapter. In the middle of the night, Malden Mills erupted into flames for no apparent reason. The explosion and fire startled citizens of the community, as many wondered what would happen to their jobs. Some company executives first learned of the blaze as they walked through an airport and saw CNN's live report of the fire on terminal television monitors. Aaron Feuerstein, Malden Mills's CEO, was at his 70th birthday party when he received a call about the fire. Clearly, crises are unexpected and can raise many different uncertainties.

Learning from a television report that your property is on fire is obviously a surreal and unexpected experience. In this case, for Malden Mills's executives, there was great uncertainty about the extent of the damage, whether or not people were hurt, and how the fire started.

> Lesson 1
>
> Organization members must accept that a crisis can start quickly and unexpectedly.

Nonroutine Crisis Events and Uncertainty

Crises are dramatic and chaotic events. One goal after a crisis is to get the organization back into operation. Organizational leaders have several options when responding to a crisis: They can respond with routine procedures, such as firing the person responsible for the crisis, minimizing the scope of the crisis, or shifting the blame. Alternatively, they can respond with unique solutions that directly rectify the crisis. Although routine solutions can be effective, they rarely rectify systemic problems in the organization. In the last chapter, we examined the BP oil spill and the high levels of uncertainty the crisis created for public information officers and the public. However, one of the largest oil spills in United States history before the BP oil spill was by Exxon in Alaska. Exxon's CEO Lawrence Rawl responded to the 1987 Exxon *Valdez* oil spill in Prince William Sound by saying, while one of its ships gushed oil into the water, that the spill was not severe and that Exxon had a good record of cleaning up much worse spills (Small, 1991). However, Rawl did not take into account that the currents in the sound were stronger than any Exxon had handled before and the dispersants that Exxon had used in other cleanups were not going to be as effective in this cleanup effort. Exxon failed, in part, because it did not address the uncertainty and novelty of the situation. Conversely, Rawl used routine solutions—minimizing the crisis and firing the intoxicated *Valdez* captain—to handle a nonroutine crisis event. As a result, Exxon received justified criticism for failing to effectively manage the spill.

Exxon would have done better had it examined the oil spill quickly and developed original solutions to protect the wildlife and environment. Exxon had been pressed for years by environmental groups to adapt its cleanup efforts to meet the unique needs of Alaska and Prince William Sound. However, the company decided to go with the routine solutions they had developed company wide.

> Lesson 2
>
> Organizations should not respond to crises with routine solutions.

Threat Perception and Uncertainty

A key characteristic of crisis is the threat to the organization's ultimate goals. Remember, in the first chapter, we argued that organizations should not focus solely on the threat associated with crises and should also consider the opportunities inherent to these events. Threat and uncertainty are linked, because there is doubt about whether organizational goals will be met as a result of the crisis. In addition, there is uncertainty about the level of threat the organization is experiencing. If you remember the definition of crisis provided in Chapter 1, you recall that we discussed perceived threat. The fact that threat is perceptual contributes to the overall uncertainty of the event: Some people in the organization may view a situation as a potential crisis, and others may not. The computer code problem Y2K, which was expected to disable many computers prior to the new millennium, was not viewed by many organizations as a potential crisis when it was first identified. The threat was not taken seriously until it was certain that the code problem could have an impact on banking, organizational record keeping, and even personal computers.

Organizations must be able to manage uncertainty associated with a crisis threat. Addressing this uncertainty involves developing consensus with stakeholders about potential threats. As a result, communication about potential threats helps reduce uncertainty about potential risks in the organization.

> Lesson 3
>
> Threat is perceptual.

Short Response Time and Uncertainty

Once an organization has experienced a crisis, it must communicate to its stakeholders. This process is inherently uncertain, because the organization typically does not have accurate or readily available information to provide to these groups. In addition, the organization may not know what is appropriate to communicate about the crisis. At times, this is because of a lack of basic crisis preparation. However, at other times, events are so dramatic and ill-defined that they severely shock organizations while revealing little information. This lack of information is particularly common in the initial moments after a crisis. When Rudy Giuliani, the former mayor of New York City, first spoke after the terrorist attacks in September of 2001, he was only able to acknowledge and confirm what the whole world had seen on television—that the World Trade Center towers had fallen. He had no other information to provide at the time. As a result, he did not speculate or predict what would happen next. All he could do was discuss what he had witnessed and answer any questions the media had for him.

One of the key tenets of crisis communication is that, following the onset of a crisis, the organization should make a statement to stakeholders in order to reduce the stakeholders' uncertainty and to avoid any appearance of not wanting to answer questions or stonewalling. There are many questions that need answering following a crisis, which is one reason the media are so attracted to these events. Often, in the presence of tremendous uncertainty created by a crisis, the affected organization is left to answer the following questions:

- What happened?
- Who is responsible?
- Why did it happen?
- Who is affected?
- What should we do?
- Who can we trust?
- What should we say?
- How should we say it?

Although this is not an exhaustive list, these are questions that every crisis communicator should be prepared to answer. In the context of the uncertainty following a crisis, reiterating that there may not be answers for many of these questions immediately following an event is important. Crisis communicators must be able to have a clear and consistent message and present this message quickly and regularly following a crisis event. If the organization is not prepared to provide definitive answers and explanations related to the crisis, the spokesperson must be able to provide information such as the organization's latest safety records, its measures for collecting information about the crisis, and a timeline for how it is going to handle the crisis in the future. Good

advice for crisis communicators is to tell people what you know, what you do not know, and what you are going to do to find answers to the still unanswered questions about the crisis.

As discussed, the surprising, nonroutine, and threatening nature of crisis creates tremendous uncertainty for crisis communicators. However, the short response time associated with crisis creates even greater uncertainty, because crisis communicators must communicate about events with little, no, or competing information about how the crisis happened, who is affected, and whether the event was managed effectively.

> Lesson 4
>
> Crisis communicators must communicate early and often following a crisis, regardless of whether they have critical information about the crisis.

The Impact of Crisis-Induced Uncertainty on Stakeholders

The next six lessons focus on how crisis communicators can turn uncertainty from a challenge into an opportunity when communicating with stakeholders. As we have discussed, because a crisis is sudden and unforeseen, uncertainty about what to say and how to make sense of the situation is a key communication challenge. Furthermore, crises often create public debates about responsibility, cause, and the impact on stakeholders. This next section focuses on the public debates that arise following a crisis and how they should be resolved ethically and responsibly. Before we go any further, here is our definition of *stakeholders*:

> Stakeholders are any groups of people internal or external to an organization who have a stake in the actions of the organization, such as employees, customers, creditors, government regulatory agencies, the media, competitors, or community members.

Stakeholders are very vocal following a crisis, as they seek information and ask questions about the crisis. They want to know who is responsible, why the crisis happened, and how they can protect themselves, along with many of the other questions we presented earlier in this chapter. Stakeholders typically want clear and quick answers to these questions to protect themselves and make sense of the crisis. However, these are difficult demands or expectations to meet. The question of who is responsible, for instance, can take weeks and sometimes years to answer. Typically, the greatest uncertainty involves determining who is at fault. Organizations and their lawyers often debate endlessly trying to determine responsibility.

In addition to determining fault, examples of the uncertainty in crises are plentiful. Consider the meltdown that took place on April 26, 1986, at the former Soviet Union's Chernobyl nuclear power plant. The meltdown, instigated by several explosions damaging the nuclear reactor, is described as the worst-ever nuclear accident. Following the crisis, there was great uncertainty regarding who was impacted and to what extent. For instance, pregnant mothers and their unborn children became critical stakeholders, as birth defects heightened significantly in the years following the meltdown. In addition, there were varying estimates on the incidence of cancer by those who may have been exposed to the radiation. In this case, the ultimate impact of the crisis on stakeholders was uncertain, complex, and open to public debate and argument.

Determining the extent of the damage of a crisis can be complicated and open to de-

bate. Researchers are still contesting whether Exxon has fully cleaned up its 1989 oil spill or whether the oil is still having a negative impact on the sound's ecosystem. Sixteen years after the spill, both the U.S. government and Exxon commissioned scientists who conducted studies were still debating whether the ecosystem was still contaminated or whether the food supply had become safe (Guterman, 2004). Twenty years after a 1984 toxic gas leak at a Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, Amnesty International reported that Indian residents continued to experience health problems associated with the event. Union Carbide, which was purchased by Dow Chemical after the crisis, argued that the site had been cleaned and there were no lasting effects from the explosion. The two groups continued to disagree about what caused the gas leak, the impact the leak had on Indian residents, and how to compensate those impacted by the crisis (Sharma, 2005). As you can see, even decades after a crisis, uncertainty is still an important variable (for information about the current status in Bhopal, see "International Campaign," n.d.).

As was illustrated in the foregoing examples, stakeholders will make public arguments concerning who is responsible, what people should do, who is affected, and how the victims should be compensated. Uncertainty and confusion increases when stakeholders disagree about the answers to these important questions surrounding crises.

Adding to the complexity are regulatory and safety decisions made following a crisis. For instance, when a chemical plant explodes, there are many competing claims regarding air safety, the cleanliness of the water supply, and the relative levels of harm associated with each potential hazard. When there are conflicting claims, the organization, independent contractors, and government regulators, such as the health departments, may conduct their own tests. It is not uncommon for each group to arrive at divergent answers, which in turn often heightens the uncertainty associated with the crisis. Such heightened uncertainty and disagreements about important questions regarding the crisis can create multiple interpretations about the same event or what we refer to as *communication ambiguity*.

Managing Communication Ambiguity Ethically During Crisis

Organizations and stakeholders may not be able to fully ascertain clear answers to key questions about the crisis until an investigation is completed. As we just discussed, investigations and disagreements about the crisis can proceed for decades. In the meantime, the uncertainty surrounding the crisis is likely to make communication about causation and responsibility ambiguous. Weick (1995) defines ambiguity as "an ongoing stream that supports several different interpretations at the same time" (pp. 91–92).

Similarly to Weick (1995), we define *communication ambiguity* as multiple interpretations of a crisis event. In the simplest terms, because of the uncertainty of crisis, there is not a clear-cut, precise answer to every important question following a crisis. As a result, each stakeholder group, including customers, workers, and the impacted public, may hold and express differing viewpoints of the event.

As a result, the inherent uncertainty related to any crisis allows for multiple interpretations. Organizations then can select an interpretation of a crisis that reflects more favorably on their actions than competing interpretations. Moreover, organizations can strategically increase the degree of ambiguity of a crisis in an effort to produce competing perspectives on the event. We believe that intentionally heightening the level of ambiguity in a crisis is unethical and irresponsible for any crisis communicator. However, we acknowledge that ambiguity is inherent to any crisis situation. So, in order to assess the ethicality of ambiguity in crisis situations, we maintain that

- ambiguity is ethical when it contributes to the complete understanding of an issue by posing alternative views that are based on complete and unbiased data that aim to inform, and
- ambiguity is unethical if it poses alternative interpretations using biased or incomplete information that aims to deceive.

In this case, how one interprets and communicates critical information about a crisis can serve to reduce, maintain, or increase the level of ambiguity inherent to that situation. A now classic case of capitalizing unethically on the inherent uncertainty of crisis and intentionally heightening its ambiguity took place in 1994 when Dr. David Kessler contended publicly that nicotine was an addictive drug. This announcement created a crisis for the tobacco industry. The tobacco industry's response, by the presidents or chairmen (all were male) of the seven largest tobacco companies, was to interject as much ambiguity into the situation as possible. They described Kessler as an extremist, downplayed and lied about the known addictiveness of nicotine, and used biased research to support their contentions (see Ulmer & Sellnow, 1997). The tobacco

industry's goal was to strategically add as much uncertainty to the debate as possible. By increasing the uncertainty about the addictiveness of nicotine, they hoped to complicate the issue enough to escape blame.

> Lesson 5
>
> Organizations should not purposely heighten the ambiguity of a crisis to deceive or distract the public.

Consistent Questions of Ambiguity

After investigating and studying communication ambiguity in crisis situations, we believe you should prepare for three areas of ambiguity where multiple interpretations often arise after an organizational crisis: questions of evidence, questions of intent, and questions of responsibility (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000) (see Table 5.1).

Questions of evidence refer to ambiguity created as a result of complex legal battles or scientific debates concerning crisis evidence. For instance, when women began coming forward with complaints regarding their Dow Corning silicone breast implants, the company downplayed these complaints with their own evidence that even a punctured implant would not cause notable distress to a woman's body. In this case, the general public was left with the question of whom to believe.

Questions of evidence focus on how complexity breeds uncertainty and ambiguity, because of the multiple interpretations available in the data collection process following the crisis. Because science can be subjective regarding how data are collected and interpreted, the results are often debated. We assert that those debates create uncertainty and ambiguity for a public trying to make sense of the crisis. A consistent debate, then, in crisis situations is one between stakeholders who view crisis evidence differently.

Questions of intent refer to whether a crisis was an accident or whether an organization knowingly put its workers or the public in danger. It may seem ridiculous that an organization would knowingly put itself in a crisis; however, history suggests that the reality of the matter is quite different. For instance, Ford Motor Company sold the Pinto (1971–1980), a car that they knew had life-threatening defects, to an unsuspecting public. The rationale for their decision was that paying settlements to individuals or families whose loved ones were injured or killed in the vehicle would cost the company less than a recall or redesign (Larsen, 1998). Questions of intent refer to whether an organization knew about potential problems and failed to correct them before a crisis or whether the crisis happened as an accident in an otherwise socially responsible system.

Whether an organization intended to cause a crisis is a critical aspect of moving beyond the crisis. There is a clear difference between an organization having an accident and an organization knowingly causing or allowing a crisis to occur. If the crisis was an accident, the public and the organization's stakeholders are much more likely to forgive the organization and potentially even help it reestablish itself. However, when an organization has been knowingly unethical or irresponsible in its business practices, the public is much less likely to forgive and forget. Many people still refuse to buy Exxon gasoline or support an organization that has destructively and knowingly

abused its business responsibilities.

Questions of responsibility refer to the level and placement of blame that should be attributed to the organization for a crisis. Should responsibility rest within or outside the organization? In 1993, Jack in the Box, a fast-food chain, experienced a food-borne illness outbreak in the form of *E. coli* bacteria. During this crisis, three children died and hundreds of Jack in the Box customers were infected (see the discussion in Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000). When asked about the crisis, Jack in the Box spokespersons insisted that meat-testing procedures at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) were much more responsible for the crisis than were Jack in the Box restaurants. In this case, Jack in the Box was placing blame for the crisis outside the purview of its organization. However, after an internal communication audit, Jack in the Box found that it had not acted on a state health department memo instructing the restaurant to increase grill temperatures in order to kill the *E. coli* bacteria in hamburger.

Whether the organization or an outside agency is responsible for the crisis is a constant and recurring type of ambiguity that contributes to the uncertainty of a crisis. One of the key communication strategies for organizations following a crisis is to deny responsibility for the event. However, shifting the blame to another organization is most often a more effective strategy. Clearly, it is more effective to say, "We are not responsible, but we know who is" rather than just saying, "We did not do it." In this case, a debate often results in which organizations cast accusations at one another, trying to place blame on the other party for the crisis. These competing accusations increases uncertainty about who is responsible for the event.

Communication ambiguity is a key factor in understanding uncertainty associated with crisis events. We have focused on three types of communication ambiguity—evidence, intent, and responsibility—that arise after a crisis and often create more uncertainty, because of the complex nature of the crisis and the multiple ways of understanding the event. Although crises are inherently complicated, there are times when communication can be open and honest and still somewhat ambiguous. This apparent contradiction is discussed in depth in the next chapter.

To recap, communication ambiguity is a central factor in managing any type of crisis. Because of the inherent uncertainty of crises, multiple interpretations and arguments are typically made about the severity of the crisis, how the crisis was caused, who is affected, and whether the organization is responsible for the event (see Table 5.2). The lessons in this section suggest that crisis communicators should be ready and willing to defend their interpretation of a crisis; to practice good, honest, ethical conduct before and after a crisis develops; and to make sure they build a case for why they are not responsible for the crisis if indeed they are not.

Lesson 6

Be prepared to defend your interpretation of the evidence surrounding a crisis.

Lesson 7

Without good intentions prior to a crisis, recovery is difficult or impossible.

Lesson 8

If you believe you are not responsible for a crisis, you need to build a case for who is responsible and why.

TABLE 5.1 ■ Consistent Questions of Ambiguity in Organizational Crisis

Ambiguity Example	Common Public Questions
Evidence	Whose scientific evidence should the public believe?
Intent	Did the organization knowingly commit the crisis?
Responsibility	Did the crisis originate within or outside of the organization?

TABLE 5.2 ■ Crisis and Uncertainty

Key Issues in Uncertainty	Organization	Stakeholder
Unanswered questions	Who, what, why, how	Who, what, why, how
Need for Information	High	High
Ambiguity	High	Confusion surrounding evidence, intent, locus
Personal Beliefs	Collapsed	Collapsed

Training, Simulations, and Uncertainty

One of the conditions of crisis is that the established organizational structure collapses following the event. When an organizational structure collapses, people are further traumatized by the lack of resources to help them make sense of the situation. For instance, after an airline crash, air patterns are disrupted, making it difficult to predict when flights will take off and land. Similarly, after a toxic release in the air or water, evacuations often disrupt families and their day-to-day functioning. Obviously, large-scale crises like 9/11 create a further collapsing of communication and other established structures, increasing the difficulty of collecting helpful information about the event.

Weick (1993) argues that the breakdown in established organizational structures is a key issue in the failure to respond appropriately to crisis situations. He argues that crises "thrust people into unfamiliar roles, leave some key roles unfilled, make the task more ambiguous, discredit the role system, and make all of these changes in a context in which small events can combine into something monstrous" (p. 638). In this case, structures are not as rigid or invulnerable as many organizations would like to think. The demands of crisis on an organization and its stakeholders can bring established structures to their knees (see Table 5.2 once again). Organizations need to train and prepare for the uncertainty, threat, and communication demands before a crisis hits. Organizations often do tabletop exercises and mock simulations to prepare for the uncertainty and destruction of crisis. Many people have seen televised accounts of New York City and other metropolitan areas training and preparing for future terrorist attacks and other crises. These simulations may include a dirty bomb placed in a sports stadium or a chemical release in a subway. These simulations help federal agencies understand how well they are able to coordinate and communicate in a crisis. As we discuss further in the next chapter, establishing strong stakeholder relationships can help prevent breakdowns in established structures.

> Lesson 9
>
> Organizations need to prepare for uncertainty through simulations and training.

Belief Structures and Uncertainty

During a crisis, the public as well as the organization experience high levels of uncertainty. Because of uncertainty during and following a crisis, stakeholders often experience what Weick (1993) refers to as *cosmology episodes*, wherein uncertainty creates a disorienting experience in which beliefs and sensemaking structures are severely hampered. These belief structures are severely impacted by the epistemic uncertainty we discussed at the beginning of this chapter. For example, following the 1997 North Dakota floods, many people experienced shock and terror as the high-cresting Red River washed away their homes. They described themselves as being traumatized by the crisis (see the discussion in Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002). Others mentioned that the only time they had experienced something so disturbing was in Vietnam. When people are suffering from collapses in their belief structures or are going through very traumatic times, effective communication can become increasingly complicated.

Along with the high uncertainty and threat associated with a crisis, organizations also experience collapses in their belief structures. Crises are often so disturbing that they change the way we think about the world. This type of uncertainty relates to the ontological uncertainty we discussed at the outset of this chapter. Just think how things have changed since 9/11. The airlines' beliefs about cockpit, passenger, and baggage safety have changed forever. Vicki Freimuth, director of the CDC during 9/11 and the anthrax letters crisis, explained that the CDC had to change its beliefs about the world twice, once after 9/11 and once after they failed to communicate effectively about the 2001 anthrax contaminations. These two events, she suggests, forced the "CDC [to] permanently alter its strategy for communicating publicly during crises" (Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2005, p. 178). These cases are illustrative of the dramatic shifts in beliefs organizations must manage while handling a crisis.

Crisis situations, then, create interesting and unconventional contexts in which both organizations and stakeholders need critical information to reduce their uncertainty. As a result, both organizations and stakeholders search for information. However, they rarely speak to one another. The organization in crisis often stonewalls and explains that if it had any information that information would be shared publicly. On the other hand, the organization's stakeholders often are left wondering if they will receive the necessary information to protect themselves and to find out what happened. Related to this vacuum of communication is the media, which often speculate on questions concerning the crisis, as information is not readily available and company spokespersons are not often available for comment.

Crises challenge the way organizations think about and conduct their business.

Summary

Communicating in the midst or the wake of a crisis is unlike communicating during any other time. Effective communication can become very difficult. During crisis situations, there are tremendous constraints on an organization to communicate effectively, yet the organization's stakeholders need critical information in order to make informed decisions. These constraints may include lack of knowledge about the severity of the problem, difficulty in identifying those affected by the crisis, and unavailability of accurate and appropriate information. In addition, decisions have to be made under stressful conditions—all this while the image and credibility of the organization are at risk. Our next chapter examines how organizations can overcome these difficulties and communicate effectively and appropriately in crisis situations.

Lessons on Uncertainty and Crisis Communication

Lesson 1: Organization members must accept that a crisis can start quickly and unexpectedly.
Lesson 2: Organizations should not respond to crises with routine solutions.
Lesson 3: Threat is perceptual.
Lesson 4: Crisis communicators must communicate early and often following a crisis regardless of whether they have critical information about the crisis.
Lesson 5: Organizations should not purposely heighten the ambiguity of a crisis to deceive or distract the public.
Lesson 6: Be prepared to defend your interpretation of the evidence surrounding a crisis.
Lesson 7: Without good intentions prior to a crisis, recovery is difficult or impossible.
Lesson 8: If you believe you are not responsible for a crisis, you need to build a case for who is responsible and why.
Lesson 9: Organizations need to prepare for uncertainty through simulations and training.
Lesson 10: Crises challenge the way organizations think about and conduct their business.

6 Applying the Lessons for Managing Crisis Uncertainty Effectively

Managing crisis-induced uncertainty is one of the most important skills of an effective crisis communicator. It is a highly specialized skill that allows crisis communicators to be ethical and responsible in their communication practices yet still provide accurate information to stakeholders. Every crisis has some level of uncertainty and as a result, the effective crisis communicator must respond appropriately. After reading the last chapter, you now understand the key elements of managing uncertainty through effective crisis communication. However, as you will see in the following cases, the practice of managing uncertainty takes considerable practice and experience. The following five cases examine managing crisis uncertainty during an environmental disaster, a delayed product recall, failures that put communities in crisis, an international foodborne illness crisis, and a corporate meltdown. Each case provides examples of key elements of crisis uncertainty. Good luck with working through these cases while developing your crisis communication skills and experience at the same time.

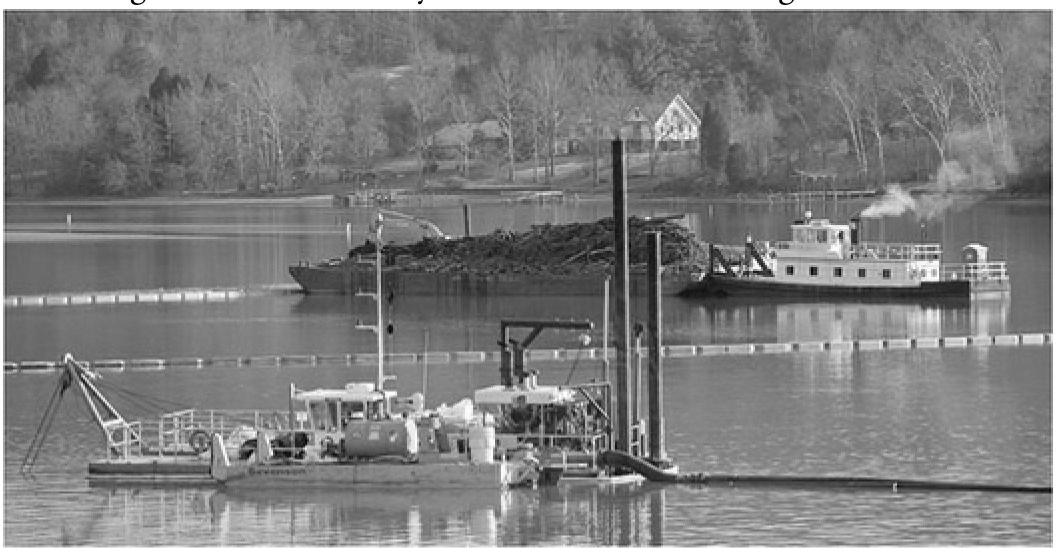
Example 6.1. Tennessee Valley Authority and the Kingston Ash Slide

The Emory River would never meander along the same peaceful path after the morning of December 22, 2008. The river flowed near the Kingston Fossil Plant, located near Knoxville, Tennessee. The plant, operated by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), burns coal to generate "10 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity a year" to serve "670,000 homes" (Tennessee Valley Authority, n.d., para. 2). In doing so, the plant creates tons of fly ash, a coal-combustion waste product. The ash, combined with water to form sludge, is stored in enormous containment ponds. The ponds, surrounded by earthen walls built by TVA, hold the ash until a portion of it can be dried and recycled into building products. On this rainy December morning, ash began to ooze from a wall of one of the ponds. The leak weakened the wall until it crumbled, discharging "5.4 million cubic yards of coal ash into the river and into a nearby community, destroying several houses and forcing families to leave the area" ("Welcome to a New Year," 2010, para. 6).

Missed Opportunities in Crisis Preparation and Planning

Simply put, TVA failed to accept the uncertainty related to storing the volume of fly ash contained in the Kingston facility. In his testimony before Congress, TVA Chief Executive Officer Tom Kilgore (2009) admitted that the crisis was the result of "long-evolving conditions" that the organization failed to recognize or consider as it heaped more and more ash into the fragile pond (para. 12). Kilgore acknowledged TVA overlooked "the existence of an unusual bottom layer of ash and silt, the high water content of the wet ash, the increasing height of ash, and the construction of the sloping dikes over the wet ash" (para. 12). Perhaps the most puzzling lapse was TVA's failure to respond to a preliminary report two months before the spill that "described a wet spot on one retaining wall that might be associated with a leak" (National Aeronautics and Space Administration, n.d., para. 5). By their nature, leaks in earthen containment systems are a sign that the moisture is eroding the integrity of the structure. Still, TVA continued to add ash to the Kingston pond without question.

Removing ash from the Emory River near the TVA Kingston Fossil Plant



Source: AP Photo/Wade Payne.

Tennessee Valley Authority's Response to an Uncertain Crisis

To its credit, TVA accepted blame for the spill, obtained emergency permission to begin dredging the Emory River—portions of which literally disappeared under the thick layer of ash—and conducted an extensive internal investigation into the organization's failures.

Some criticized the timing of the dredging process undertaken by TVA. For example, Gregory Button, an anthropologist on faculty at the University of Tennessee, told the *Knoxville News Sentinel*, a major newspaper in the region, that, although the cleanup was launched relatively soon after the spill, he was "worried about the haste in cleaning up the waste" ("Vines," 2009, para. 9). Button and others were concerned that no independent party was allowed to assess the dredging plan before it was launched. Button insisted that including hearings with a third party about the cleanup would be to "TVA's advantage," because "it will haunt TVA if it doesn't work out" (para. 10).

Despite criticism, the dredging continued through 2009 and into 2010. Cleanup of the land impacted by the spill began after the Emory River was cleared of ash. The *Knoxville News Sentinel* emphasized the notoriety of the spill that was "called one of the worst environmental disasters in the nation by the federal Environmental Protection Agency" and has a projected cleanup cost that is "expected to exceed $1.2 billion, not including lawsuits filed against TVA" ("Welcome to a new year," 2010, para. 7).

TVA's internal investigation into the organization's failures leading up to the crisis was extensive. In addition to conducting its own review, the TVA board of directors commissioned the law firm of McKenna Long & Aldridge (MLA) to look at any "management, controls, and standards issues that may have contributed to the event and to make recommendations on culture and organizational effectiveness" (Kilgore, 2009, para. 10). The law firm identified six primary failures in TVA's "systems, controls, standards, and culture" (Ide & Blanco, 2009, p. 2) in place at the Kingston plant:

- *"Lack of Clarity and Accountability for Ultimate Responsibility."* Multiple group involvement in decision making and frequent reorganization created a "lack of accountability" (p. 3).
- *"Lack of Standardization, Training and Metrics."* TVA had "no standard procedures" in place for managing ash ponds (p. 4). Separate manuals existed for each facility, and in many cases, the manuals were not updated.
- *"Siloed Responsibilities and Poor Communication."* TVA had four separate divisions sharing responsibilities for maintaining ash retention facilities. Communication among these divisions was "strained and in some instances, nonexistent" (p. 4). The report noted one example where engineers failed to instruct workers

to suspend work on the pond because of excessive moisture. When the engineers were asked why they failed to provide this instruction, they responded, "no one had asked" (p. 4).
- *"Lack of Checks and Balances."* TVA failed to create a quality assurance or quality control plan. Thus, employees failed to perform routine inspections "to ensure that the pond was constructed pursuant to the engineered specifications" (p. 4). The report found "the lack of a Quality Assurance/Quality Control [plan] created an environment where employees felt empowered to ignore engineers and 'build it better' than the drawings" (p. 4).
- *"Lack of Prevention Priority and Resources."* TVA facilities failed to provide the necessary upkeep on the walls of their retention ponds. The report indicated that this failure was because of a lack of prioritization of preventive activities, such as mowing the earthen walls and removing tree growth that could weaken them. Overall, TVA's funding "was inadequate for routine maintenance, creating a situation in which adequate inspections were impossible because the sides of the dikes were overgrown and maintenance needs compounded over time" (p. 5).
- *"Reactive Instead of Proactive."* When seeps or leaks were found in the dike's walls, they were patched without "investigating the cause of incidents beyond the specific physical occurrences" (p. 5). As similar warning signs were seen, "no effort was made to leverage the lessons learned across" the fleet of similar ponds managed by TVA (p. 5).

This extensive list of failures provides a clear overview of how TVA failed to respond to warning signs and actually heightened uncertainty by its internal communication or lack thereof.

In his testimony before Congress, Tom Kilgore acknowledged the findings of the MLA report and pledged to create a more safety-conscious culture and to improve internal communication. To improve the organization's culture, Kilgore (2009) vowed to act on "several lessons learned about the challenges facing us" (para. 29). He summarized these lessons as follows:

- Storage facilities and structures should not be built in areas where stability cannot be assured and verified.
- Aggressive, rigorous inspections and structural analysis of all coal-combustion product storage have been initiated and will be kept current.
- Management will visibly demonstrate and emphasize the need for self-assessments to promote objective and fact-based reporting, inspections, and auditing.
- Safety-related risks must be given the highest priority to identify, minimize, and eliminate risks.
- Engineering design philosophy, design, and construction of ash management facilities must be standardized.
- The handling, storage, and disposal operations for coal-combustion products

must be standardized.

Each of these strategies was designed to overcome the organization's failure to respond proactively and accurately to the warning signs the company failed to heed.

Kilgore (2009) also recognized that poor communication, unclear accountability, and a lack of follow-through contributed notably to the crisis. As such, he promised to make the following changes at TVA (para. 30):

- Clear accountabilities
- Strong governance
- Robust self-assessment
- Independent reviews for quality and compliance
- A culture of personal responsibility and problem solving

Through these substantial changes, Kilgore (2009) hoped to use the Kingston crisis as a "wake-up call for TVA" and to "rebuild the public's trust" (para. 5).

As the cleanup and organizational changes continue, some residents worry about the long-term impact of the spill. For example, lingering uncertainty about possible contamination of the groundwater supply, loss of property values in the entire region, and fears that, as the spilled ash begins to dry, airborne pollutants will place residents at risk remain largely unaddressed by the current TVA crisis response plan. Consequently, area residents have organized to bring a lawsuit against TVA. Oak Ridge attorney Michael Ritter said, "the figure of $165 million is just the tip of the iceberg" (Huotari, 2009, para. 2). The lawsuit alleges "that the spill hurt family incomes, destroyed property or property values, created potential future medical expenses, probably hurt property sales for years, and caused severe mental anguish and a loss of 'the right to enjoy life'" (para. 13). Rather than addressing these concerns directly, TVA largely ignored them in its response plan. Although lawsuits are common in crises such as the Kingston ash slide, at least one plaintiff insists he would not have sued if TVA had addressed his concerns. At a press conference announcing the lawsuit, this plaintiff said bluntly, "had the TVA done what the TVA should, we wouldn't be here" (para. 23).

Summary

The Kingston ash slide is a clear example of the peril an organization can create by failing to accept uncertainty in crisis planning and response. TVA did not have an organizational structure or culture that was prepared to respond to warning signs. The efficiency of the recovery process was hampered by TVA's need to undergo extensive innovations in its organizational communication patterns and its organizational culture regarding safety. Warning signs were either missed altogether or observed and not shared among relevant parties in the organization. Although TVA responded to these deficiencies in earnest, its cleanup plan fails to address the uncertainty residents feel about the long-term danger of toxins in the fly ash and dwindling property values. As of 2017, the public and environmentalists had not forgotten this crisis.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time to determine how the TVA handled the uncertainty we discussed in Chapter 5. First, take a moment to refresh in your mind the lessons established on managing uncertainty. Second, note that these lessons serve as touchstones and discussion points for what we believe are key aspects of any crisis response. As you answer the questions that follow, consider whether the TVA was effective or ineffective in its managing of uncertainty surrounding the crisis. We have rephrased the lessons into questions so that you are better able to address the key issues in the case.

Lessons on Managing Crisis Uncertainty

Lesson 1: Organizational members must accept that a crisis can start quickly and unexpectedly.

- Did the Kingston ash slide happen quickly? Was it unexpected?

Lesson 2: Organizations should not respond to crises with routine solutions.

- Did TVA respond to the crisis in a routine manner? Did their response address the problems with their organizational culture?

Lesson 3: Threat is perceptual.

- In what way was the threat associated with this crisis perceptual? How did perceptions differ among stakeholders?

Lesson 4: Crisis communicators must communicate early and often following a crisis regardless of whether they have critical information about the crisis.

- Did Tom Kilgore communicate early and often about the crisis? Was he effective or ineffective?

Lesson 5: Organizations should not purposely heighten the ambiguity of a crisis to deceive or distract the public.

- Were there issues that were uncertain or ambiguous for stakeholders after the crisis?
- Did TVA contribute to the uncertainty surrounding the crisis?

Lesson 6: Be prepared to defend your interpretation of the evidence surrounding a crisis.

- Did TVA defend its interpretation of evidence surrounding the crisis? Was TVA effective or ineffective?

Lesson 7: Without good intentions prior to a crisis, recovery is difficult or impossible.

- Did TVA have good intentions with stakeholders prior to the Kingston ash slide?

Lesson 8: If you believe you are not responsible for a crisis, you need to build a case for who is responsible and why.

- Did TVA build a case for why it was or was not responsible for the crisis? Was TVA effective or ineffective?

Lesson 9: Organizations need to prepare for uncertainty through simulations and training.

- Did TVA prepare adequately for the risk of a major ash spill?

Lesson 10: Crises challenge the way organizations think about their business.

- Should this crisis have changed TVA's management style? If so, how?

Example 6.2. L'Aquila: A Case of Miscommunication

Italy's environment minister compared the six-year manslaughter sentences of six Italian scientists and one public official to the accusations of heresy Galileo faced nearly 400 years earlier (Sturloni, 2012). *Time* magazine equated the sentences to a bleak past "when there were witches to burn and demons to exorcise" (Kluger, 2012, para. 1). The source of this outcry was the 2009 earthquake disaster in L'Aquila, Italy, that killed 309 people, injured 1,500, and temporarily displaced 65,000 residents. Given the clearly established fact that scientists cannot *predict* earthquakes such as the residents of L'Aquila experienced, how could these scientists be accused of manslaughter? The answer is in how their message was translated and interpreted.

Days before the deadly earthquake, the Italian government convened a meeting, attended by all six scientists and the public official Bernardo De Bernardinis to discuss the risk of a possible earthquake in L'Aquila. The meeting was called in response to pleas from worried residents. For months, the community, which sits on a fault line, had experienced tremors that they feared might be a sign of a forthcoming major earthquake. Community worries were also intensified by the claims of a local physics lab technician (not an earth scientist) Gioacchino Giuliani, who claimed that the higher radon levels he observed were a clear indication that a major earthquake was imminent.

Communicating to the Public About L'Aquila's Immediate Risk

The panel of scientists convened and reviewed the available data in L'Aquila. They accurately observed that the radon data shared by Giuliani had no scientific validity. The group saw no merit in his methods and disregarded his claims. Ultimately, the group concluded that "there was no reason to say that a sequence of small-magnitude events can be considered a sure predictor of a strong event." (Jordan, 2013, p. 5). What happened next was the prelude to the L'Aquila crisis. De Bernardinis, a nonscientist who was a senior official in the Civil Protection Authority to the L'Aquila, called a press conference where he told residents, "The scientific community tells us there is no danger, because there is an ongoing discharge of energy. The situation looks favorable" (Nosengo, 2010, para. 4). None of scientists were present at the press conference when De Bernardinis shared these remarks. According to some accounts, De Bernardinis went so far as to confirm a reporter's assessment that, given the lack of risk, the worried residents should return to their homes and relax with a glass of wine. Six days later, the deadly earthquake hit L'Aquila.

The Investigation

The residents of L'Aquila and their families were outraged by the perceived insensitivity and lack of warning provided by the six scientists and De Bernardinis. They were all indicted on charges of manslaughter. The indictments against the scientists seemed to suggest that they should have been able to predict the earthquake in L'Aquila. Such predictions, however, are impossible based on the science available to earthquake experts. For this reason, scientists across the globe responded to the indictments with letters of protest sent to Italy's president. In reflecting on the accusations, Thomas Jordan, a world-renowned earthquake specialist at the University of Southern California, explained that the content provided by the six earthquake scientists was "scientifically correct, although few seismologists would consider it to be scientifically complete" (Jordan, 2013, p. 5). By contrast, Jordan said the words shared by De Bernardinis at the press conference were "not scientifically accurate" (Jordan, 2013, p. 5).

During the post-crisis investigation, a plot twist emerged. Evidence suggested that De Bernardinis and his supervisor organized the meeting, in part, to provide scientific evidence to debunk and silence the claims by Giuliani. Giuliani's radon-based predictions, despite being scientifically unsound, had intensified the residents' fears. Some assumed that De Bernardinis had intentionally oversimplified the scientists' claims, in part, to counter Giuliani's influence on the committee. Independent scientists concluded after the L'Aquila earthquake that Giuliani's predictions had been inaccurate in the past and that his "prediction" of an earthquake in L'Aquila was due to chance. Nevertheless, De Bernardinis's credibility was further hampered by this revelation, and all seven individuals were convicted of manslaughter.

Worker examining the devastation following the earthquake



Source: MARKA/Alamy Stock Photo

The Outcome

The legal saga of L'Aquila continued for seven years. The seven convicted men appealed their sentences. In 2014, all six scientists were acquitted, and two years later, De Bernardinis was also acquitted of his manslaughter conviction (Cartlidge, 2016). Still, the L'Aquila crisis has notably influenced the earthquake science community. The key lessons involve overcoming misconceptions of earthquake predictability and the need for thoughtful translation of scientific information before speaking with the residents in earthquake prone areas. L'Aquila revealed a gap in what many people believe is possible for predicting earthquakes. Simply put, the heightened risk of an earthquake may be forecastable, but actually predicting an earthquake in the long-term is impossible. Further, sharing scientific details that are beyond the understanding of an audience is not helpful, but oversimplifying a situation the way De Bernardinis did is irresponsible. Thoughtful and accurate translation of scientific data that is comprehendible by the nonscientific public is essential.

Summary

The actual earthquake in L'Aquila was inevitable. So too are controversial figures like Bernardo De Bernardinis, claiming they are clairvoyant beyond what science and logic dictate. The confusion about what the scientists did and did not say and about the capacity for earthquake prediction, however, could have been avoided. The L'Aquila case is a vivid example of how communication failures can escalate traumatically. The L'Aquila case even set in motion a concerted effort by the earthquake science community to reconsider how they communicate about earthquake probability and forecasting.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time for you to determine if the L'Aquila crisis was handled effectively by the scientists, Giuliani, and De Bernadinis. Did their communication help reduce uncertainty? Was honest and empathic communication practiced? First, take a moment to refresh your mind on the lessons established in Chapter 5 for managing crisis uncertainty. These lessons should guide you in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the L'Aquila communication.

Lessons on Managing Crisis Uncertainty

Lesson 1: Organization members must accept that a crisis can start quickly and unexpectedly.

- Was the L'Aquila crisis unexpected?
- Did the L'Aquila crisis start quickly?

Lesson 2: Organizations should not respond to crises with routine solutions.

- What responses in the L'Aquila case would you characterize as nonroutine?

Lesson 3: Threat is perceptual.

- Were different perceptions of threat present surrounding the L'Aquila crisis?

Lesson 4: Crisis communicators must communicate early and often following a crisis regardless of whether they have critical information about the crisis.

- Did those responding to the L'Aquila situation communicate early and often?

Lesson 5: Organizations should not purposely heighten the ambiguity of a crisis to deceive or distract the public.

- Were there issues that were uncertain or ambiguous for the public during the L'Aquila crisis?
- What aspects of the issue were communicated in an open and honest manner before the L'Aquila crisis?

Lesson 6: Be prepared to defend your interpretation of the evidence surrounding a crisis.

- What was the interpretation of the evidence surrounding the L'Aquila crisis by the scientists, Giuliani, and De Bernadinis? How was this evident in their communication with publics?

Lesson 7: Without good intentions prior to a crisis, recovery is difficult or impossible.

- Did the events prior to the onset of the L'Aquila crisis impact how it unfolded?
- Did publics have a positive view of the earthquake scientists and Giuliani prior to this crisis?

Lesson 8: If you believe you are not responsible for a crisis, you need to build a case for who is responsible and why.

- Was there a need to build a case regarding responsibility during this crisis? What role did the global earthquake community play in this process?

Lesson 9: Organizations need to prepare for uncertainty through simulations and training.

- Was preparedness demonstrated prior to L'Aquila?

Lesson 10: Crises challenge the way organizations think about and conduct their business.

- How did the L'Aquila crisis challenge the normal practice of earthquake science?
- How did the earthquake scientists use the crisis as an opportunity for organizational learning and growth?

Example 6.3. General Motors and Mary Barra

Early in 2014, General Motors (GM) initiated a recall on ignition switches for numerous vehicles, which eventually included almost 30 million cars worldwide. Faulty ignition switches had been associated with 124 deaths, and the company was facing major lawsuits, congressional investigations, and loss of consumer confidence. The defect was discovered in 2004 when GM was replacing the Chevrolet Cavalier with the Cobalt, but the company did not properly fix the problem because of costs and time. Even after a 16-year-old driver died because of an alleged faulty ignition switch, GM did not issue a recall. Instead, the company issued a service bulletin. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and other safety regulators did not conduct an investigation or a probe, despite several other complaints, field reports, and deaths associated with the ignition switches.

In June 2009, GM filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, and in July 2009, the US government purchased the company's assets. In June 2013, an engineer who had worked on the Chevrolet Cobalt spoke out and reported the decision not to fix the defective switches. In December 2013, the U.S. government sold its share of GM. The company later determined that the faulty ignition switches were associated with at least 31 vehicle crashes and 13 deaths. Just weeks later, on January 14, 2014, Mary Barra became CEO of GM.

Barra was the first female CEO of a major automaker. She was given the monumental task of both managing the company's financial recovery and managing a major product crisis. Once Barra learned the details of the faulty ignition switches, GM officially contacted NHTSA in early February 2014 to declare that a defect existed in over 600,000 cars (Basu, 2014). Within a week, GM recalled 2005 to 2007 Chevrolet Cobalts and 2007 Pontiac G5s. Over the next month, GM hired two law firms to investigate the recall and added additional vehicles to the recall. An attorney who specializes in corporate payouts, Kenneth Feinberg, was hired to guide the company's response to victims and their families affected by the recall. The U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee scheduled a hearing about the recall and asked Barra to testify. She remained open, honest, and empathetic in her responses. Perhaps more importantly, Barra used the crisis as an opportunity to evaluate company policies, learn from their mistakes, and demonstrate GM's commitment to safety and their customers.

Honesty, Candor, and Openness

While speaking to employees soon after the onset of the crisis, Barra said, "Something went wrong with our process in this instance, and terrible things happened. We will be better because of this tragic situation if we seize the opportunity" (Vlasic & Jensen, 2014). She kept this same demeanor when testifying before the U.S. House subcommittee. She openly stated, "Sitting here today, I cannot tell you why it took years for a safety defect to be announced in that program, but I can tell you that we will find out" (McEachern, 2014). Rather than deflect or deny responsibility, Barra openly acknowledged mistakes that GM had made and promised to work to correct them. In this way, she pledged to identify the mistakes and learn from them in a way that moved the company toward renewal.

Communicate With Compassion, Concern, and Empathy

A very important part of Barra's message involved communicating compassion, concern, and empathy for those harmed by the defects and recalls. During her congressional testimony, she said, "my sincere apologies to everyone who has been affected by this recall, especially to the families and friends of those who lost their lives or were injured. I am deeply sorry" (McEachern, 2014). Leaders often avoid making direct apologies like this, because they are afraid of increasing legal liability. Barra chose to be open about the company's customer safety failures. She even posted an apology video and various video updates on GM's YouTube page (General Motors, 2014).

Mary Barra communicated with the public in a way that displayed empathy and devotion to fixing the problem. She acknowledged mistakes the company had made and repeatedly apologized for what had happened. For example, in a June 2014 town hall meeting Barra stated the following:

> I realize there are no words of mine that can ease their grief and pain. But as I lead GM through this crisis, I want everyone to know that I am guided by two clear principles: First that we do the right thing for those who were harmed; and, second, that we accept responsibility for our mistakes and commit to doing everything within our power to prevent this problem from ever happening again. ("Text, video of GM," 2014)

These repeated statements reduced uncertainty about blame, plans to correct the problems, and GM's commitment.

Mary Barra



Source: Bill Pugliano/Getty Images.

Process Approaches and Policy Development

Barra also described in detail GM's plans to increase safety and improve its products. In the same employee town hall meeting, she described her plans. "I never want to put this behind us. I want to keep this painful experience permanently in our collective memories. I don't want to forget what happened because I know you never want this to happen again" ("Text, video of GM," 2014). To ensure a capacity for identifying defective products, GM's "Speak up for Safety" campaign was launched in April 2014. The campaign encouraged workers to "speak up" when they identified a safety issue that could affect the quality of GM products and potentially customers' safety. This was part of Barra's commitment to learn from the crisis and create a better, more responsive company. These actions helped reduce uncertainty about GM's future and provided the public with a visible commitment to learn from this crisis.

Summary

Barra inherited a serious crisis that demanded notable action. She took steps to correct the errors of the past and did so in a forthright manner. Her ultimate goal, however, was far greater than the crisis at hand. She accepted the bigger challenge of transforming a GM culture that had allowed the crisis to occur in the first place. Doing so required her to simultaneously focus on the past and the present. Ideally, the past mistakes serve as reminders of the importance of speaking up for safety.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time for you to determine if GM's ignition switch crisis was handled effectively by CEO Mary Barra. Did her communication help reduce uncertainty? Was honest and empathic communication practiced? First, take a moment to refresh your mind on the lessons established in Chapter 5 for managing crisis uncertainty. These lessons should guide you in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of Barra's communication.

Lessons on Managing Crisis Uncertainty

Lesson 1: Organization members must accept that a crisis can start quickly and unexpectedly.

- Was GM's crisis unexpected?
- Did GM's crisis start quickly?

Lesson 2: Organizations should not respond to crises with routine solutions.

- What responses by Barra would you characterize as nonroutine?

Lesson 3: Threat is perceptual.

- Were different perceptions of threat present within GM's crisis?

Lesson 4: Crisis communicators must communicate early and often following a crisis regardless of whether they have critical information about the crisis.

- How did Barra's frequent communication shape the way GM's crisis unfolded?

Lesson 5: Organizations should not purposely heighten the ambiguity of a crisis to deceive or distract the public.

- Were there issues that were uncertain or ambiguous for the public during GM's crisis?
- What aspects of GM's crisis were communicated in an honest manner by Barra?

Lesson 6: Be prepared to defend your interpretation of the evidence surrounding a crisis.

- What was Barra's interpretation of the evidence surrounding the GM crisis? How was this evident in her communication with publics?

Lesson 7: Without good intentions prior to a crisis, recovery is difficult or impossible.

- Did the events prior to the onset of GM's crisis impact how it unfolded?
- Did publics have a positive view of GM prior to this crisis?

Lesson 8: If you believe you are not responsible for a crisis, you need to build a case for who is responsible and why.

- Was there a need to build a case regarding responsibility during this crisis?

Lesson 9: Organizations need to prepare for uncertainty through simulations and training.

- Was preparedness demonstrated by Barra?

Lesson 10: Crises challenge the way organizations think about and conduct their business.

- How did GM's crisis challenge the company's business conduct?
- How did Barra use the crisis as an opportunity for organizational learning and growth?

Example 6.4. King Car's Response to the 2008 Melamine Crisis

In August 2008, the Asian food industry experienced a widespread crisis. Chinese food companies were implicated with increasing the amount of protein in their nondairy milk products by adding melamine to inflate their apparent protein contents. The crisis originally began in 2007, when dogs and cats began to experience kidney failure after eating pet food that contained high levels of melamine. The crisis expanded when nearly 300,000 infants became ill and six died after consuming melamine-contaminated baby formula produced by Chinese dairy product company Sanlu. At this time, there was heightened uncertainty among companies worldwide regarding the safety of Chinese food ingredients. Initially, the Chinese government was slow to respond and denied any problems with their food products. This created more uncertainty and doubt about the safety of products originating from China. For instance, the USDA and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) subjected all imported food products from China to physical examination before they could enter the United States.

Reducing Crisis Uncertainty

King Car, a Taiwanese food company, responded immediately to the melamine crisis, because it imported many Chinese-based ingredients for its milk products. At the time of the crisis, the Taiwanese Department of Health emphasized its strong food testing system in their initial communications and tried to minimize concern and reassure the public about its strong food safety regulations. However, there was considerable public unrest and uncertainty about whether Taiwanese products were safe. On Saturday, September 13, 2008, King Car called an emergency meeting and decided to hold a media conference to discuss product safety (Ku, 2009). At this time, Mr. Lee, the chairman of King Car, explained that the only way to ensure public trust was to have King Car test its products for excessive melamine levels in addition to the government testing to ensure their safety (Chen, 2008; Ku, 2009). After testing of its products was complete, King Car determined that in fact its milk products contained unacceptably high levels of melamine, even though the Taiwanese government tested these products.

A Guiding Vision for King Car's Crisis Communication

At the outset of the crisis, Chairman Lee set a guiding philosophy for King Car's response. He told his senior management there were no limits on the budget for fixing the crisis (Wu, Hsieh, & Peng, 2008). Chairman Lee explained that customer trust was of the utmost importance to King Car. He noted that King Car had worked for 50 years to gain the trust of its customers and that the company would do everything in its power to maintain this trust throughout the crisis.

After learning through its own investigation that its products were contaminated, King Car immediately sent these results to a second laboratory to have the results quickly checked again. King Car could have taken the word of the Taiwanese government, but it decided to take matters into its own hands and test its products independently to ensure the safety of its customers.

Initial Crisis Communication

When King Car's second round of testing came back positive for high levels of melamine, the company immediately engaged the public with its information. First, King Car notified the Taiwanese Department of Health about the contamination it had found independently of the Taiwanese government tests. Second, the general manager for King Car personally called media reporters to make them aware of the contamination and to inform the public. In this case, the public was under the impression that government tests were adequate and Taiwanese products were safe. King Car wanted to apologize for the unsafe products and make sure that the public had information about how to protect themselves. Lin (2008) explains that King Car chose to publicize its contaminated products before the Taiwanese government's tests had identified high levels of melamine. Without King Car's own testing and quick communication, the crisis would have most certainly been much worse. At this time, King Car also informed all its retailers that King Car was recalling all its nondairy milk powder.

Taiwanese customers check King Car products for a new safety stamp



Source: AP Photo/Chen qianjun.

The Recall

After King Car had determined its product was not safe for consumption, they communicated to retailers across Taiwan about a recall. Over time, King Car had developed strong, positive relationships with these retailers that made communication easier and more productive. As a result, the company was able to recall over 95% of its product in three days. To help with the recall, King Car provided unconditional refunds to all its customers, even without a receipt. As a result, within a week, almost 100% of its product was recalled. King Car also announced that it would soon have safe products for consumption with a different package and a certification of safety stamp on it. The repackaging and certification enabled King Car to differentiate its products from those that were not tested or certified. King Car also set up toll-free service lines to answer any and all customer questions about the recall and the safety of the products. The company also made product tests public via its website so consumers could check to see if the products they had purchased were safe (Young, Lo, Lee, & Chu, 2008). Finally, King Car invited reporters to its plant to see the recalled products being destroyed. The cost of the recall was estimated at over $3 million dollars. These actions received widespread critical acclaim from the Taiwanese public, media, and scholars (Lin, 2008).

Critical Acclaim

King Car received widespread critical acclaim for its response to the melamine crisis. In fact, King Car was able to quickly restore trust with the public and its stakeholders as a result of its response. On the other hand, companies like Nestle and United, which refused to admit the use of contaminated ingredients until a month later, struggled for public acceptance. A Taiwanese business magazine, *Business Today*, explained that the melamine crisis upset everybody, yet King Car was the only organization willing to apologize and fix the problem. Their attitude makes them the model for other companies (Ku, 2009). *Apple Daily*, a Taiwanese newspaper, explained King Car is probably the only company that's going to be forgiven by the public throughout this Chinese poisoned-milk crisis (Ku, 2009).

Summary

The King Car crisis is a classic case of how threat, surprise, short-response time, and uncertainty can impact decision making and communication following a crisis. Under the stress and uncertainty of the crisis, King Car made a critical mistake by shifting blame for the crisis outside the organization, when the company had not checked to make sure that it was not responsible. King Car capitalized on the uncertainty of the situation in the short term, but when an internal investigation revealed that the company's headquarters had received the new state standard, it quickly moved to accepting responsibility and learning from the crisis.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time to determine whether King Car dealt effectively with the type of uncertainty we described in Chapter 5. First, take a moment to refresh in your mind the lessons established on managing uncertainty. These lessons should help you identify the strengths and weaknesses of King Car's crisis response. As you contemplate the questions that follow, consider whether King Car was effective or ineffective in addressing the crisis from beginning to end. We have rephrased the lessons into questions so that you are better able to address the key issues in the case.

Lessons on Managing Crisis Uncertainty

Lesson 1: Organization members must accept that a crisis can start quickly and unexpectedly.

- In what ways did King Car's crisis start quickly and with uncertainty?

Lesson 2: Organizations should not respond to crises with routine solutions.

- Did King Car respond to the crisis in a routine manner? Was their response effective?

Lesson 3: Threat is perceptual.

- In what ways was the threat associated with this crisis perceptual? How did perceptions differ among stakeholders?

Lesson 4: Crisis communicators must communicate early and often following a crisis regardless of whether they have critical information about the crisis.

- Did King Car communicate early and often following the crisis? Were they effective or ineffective?

Lesson 5: Organizations should not purposely heighten the ambiguity of a crisis to deceive or distract the public.

- Were there issues that were uncertain or ambiguous for stakeholders following the crisis? Did King Car heighten or reduce the ambiguity surrounding the crisis?

Lesson 6: Be prepared to defend your interpretation of the evidence surrounding a crisis.

- Did King Car defend its interpretation of evidence surrounding the crisis? Was King Car effective or ineffective?

Lesson 7: Without good intentions prior to a crisis, recovery is difficult or impossible.

- Had King Car developed good relationships with stakeholders prior to the crisis?

Lesson 8: If you believe you are not responsible for a crisis, you need to build a case for who is responsible and why.

- Did responsibility emerge as a key factor in King Car's response to the melamine crisis? Was King Car's response effective or ineffective?

Lesson 9: Organizations need to prepare for uncertainty through simulations and training.

- Is there evidence that King Car was prepared to respond to the crisis?

Lesson 10: Crises challenge the way organizations think about and conduct

their business.

- In what ways did King Car and the food industry change the way it conducts its business following the melamine crisis?

Example 6.5. Flint, Michigan, Water Contamination

In 2014, the city of Flint, Michigan, experienced lead contamination of its municipal water supply. Somewhere between 6,000 and 12,000 children were exposed to drinking water with high levels of lead. Lead is associated with many serious health problems, including abnormal cognitive development and behavioral problems in children. The contamination is also associated with an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease that affected some 77 people and resulted in ten deaths. This crisis was the result of a variety of factors, including failures in leadership, failures in technology, and especially failures with communication. The crisis originated when the Flint Municipal Water Department switched its water supply from the Detroit Water and Sewage Department (DWSD) and began drawing water from the Flint River in an effort to save money. The Flint River water was a short-term solution until a new pipeline to Lake Huron was completed. Almost immediately, residents began to complain about the water taste, smell, and look. In August 2014, fecal coliform bacterium was detected, and residents in some neighborhoods were told to boil their water.

The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) stated that the use of chlorine and system flushes would limit future contamination. Unfortunately, soon after, the state found the levels of disinfectants in the water were in violation of the Safe Drinking Water Act, and in January of 2015, the city warned residents that the levels of disinfectants in the water may cause health issues. Residents were still complaining about the water quality—specifically its discoloration—and health issues developing in children. Despite this, the MDEQ still claimed that the water issues were not a health emergency.

In February 2015, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) notified the MDEQ of dangerous levels of lead in the water. They had detected 104 parts per billion (ppb), while the EPA's limit for lead in drinking water is 15. Again, in June 2015, the EPA issued a memo to Flint officials, warning that they had failed to treat the water with anti-corrosion chemicals, which helps control lead. Once this memo was made public by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Michigan, city officials and MDEQ reassured residents that the problem was not widespread. Two months later, the MDEQ ordered corrosion control treatment in Flint after their tests revealed above average levels of lead in the water supply. At this time, researchers from Virginia Tech University announced that approximately 40% of Flint households had elevated levels of lead in their water and that the Flint River water was corroding the city's water pipes, causing lead to seep into the water supply. Another research team, led by a Flint pediatrician, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, revealed that since the switch to Flint River water, the number of Flint children with elevated lead levels in their blood had doubled—with more seriously contaminated areas showing levels that nearly tripled. On October 16, 2015, the City of Flint finally reconnected to DWSD water. On De-

cember 14, 2015, Flint declared a state of emergency. The EPA's Flint Safe Drinking Water Task Force noted that the crisis resulted from a failure of state regulators (Ganim & Tran, 2016; CNN, 2017).

Following this, Governor Snyder declared a state of emergency in Genesee County, and the Michigan National Guard was mobilized to distribute bottled water. Declaring Flint in a "state of emergency" allowed for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to provide assistance.

Protesters following the Flint water crisis



Source: Photo by Erik McGregor/Pacific Press/LightRocket via Getty Images.

Failure to Listen to Public Concerns

Flint's water contamination crisis demonstrates several failures by governmental agencies to listen to and address public concerns. For example, Flint residents used various mediums to voice concerns about the water quality, ultimately calling attention to the issue and sharing their concerns with friends, family, community, media outlets, and so forth. Some residents even directly contacted governmental agencies, including Lee Anne Walters. Walters, a mother of four, became concerned about the water quality and contacted the city as well as MDEQ. She did not feel as though her concerns were sufficiently addressed by these agencies and proceeded to reach out to the EPA.

While Walters felt that EPA representatives acknowledged her concerns, she was not informed about the real risks. Eventually, an EPA employee leaked a draft memo to Walters that detailed issues about high lead levels in Flint's water. Walters proceeded to contact an investigative reporter who then made the memo public. After this report was made public, a spokesperson for the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality responded, saying, "Anyone who is concerned about lead in the drinking water in Flint can relax. There is no broad problem right now that we've seen with lead in the drinking water in Flint" (Smith, 2015b). Moreover, city and state officials attributed the leaked EPA report to a "rogue employee." After these dismissive responses, Walters contacted Virginia Tech University researchers and asked that they help investigate the water issues.

Many governmental officials involved in Flint's water crisis minimized, denied, deflected, attempted to shift blame, and even ignored vital information and concerns coming from the public. Repeatedly, the public was told by governmental organizations that the municipal water was safe to drink. Even after these messages were disseminated to the public, residents voiced concern because of the water's discoloration and smell. This was compounded by the involvement of multiple governmental agencies, which struggled with cross-organizational and interorganizational conflicts and public communication.

Multiple Agencies

Communication within, among, between, and from agencies involved with Flint's water crisis show many issues and problems. There were numerous agencies involved in making decisions about the municipal water, investigating the water issues, communicating to the public, and communicating to each other. These agencies included the City of Flint, DWSD, MDEQ, Governor Rick Snyder's office, EPA, and teams of independent researchers. Rather than collaborating and communicating effectively with one another, these agencies operated within siloes, decisions were made without consultation with other agencies, and public concerns were regularly dismissed. For example, on March 23, 2015, the Flint City Council voted to reconnect to DWSD and stop using water from the Flint River. However, state officials overruled this decision, and the city continued to use corrosive Flint River water. There were also overly certain and reassuring messages sent between federal and state agencies.

In February 2015, the EPA notified MDEQ of high lead levels in the municipal water supply, specifying tests from the Walters' home. MDEQ responded via email that an optimized corrosion control program was in at the city's water treatment plant. However, the MDEQ later retracted their previous statement and notified the EPA that Flint had no corrosion control treatment. As the decision systems in Flint demonstrated failures in effective communication—at multiple levels—residents began to grow distrustful of these agencies. This lack of trust further complicated communication and made the crisis worse.

Failure to Accept Uncertainty and Ambiguity

State and local officials regularly discounted the existence of serious problems and downplayed the concerns of Flint residents at several points during the crisis. Residents were told the water was safe to drink, even though this was not certain and many residents continued to complain about the water's discoloration and smell. To demonstrate the water's apparent safety, political leaders, including Governor Snyder, pledged to drink filtered municipal tap water. The quality of the water was uncertain, as comprehensive testing and evaluation had not taken place throughout the entire city. Additionally, the effects of consuming the contaminated water were unknown, particularly for children and for people with underlying health conditions. Overall, communication by the various agencies failed to adequately provide the public with critical information and avoided acknowledging any possibility that a public health risk existed until months after residents were exposed to highly contaminated water.

Summary

The shortsighted decisions that preceded the Flint crisis were compounded by an unwillingness to recognize and respond to the problem. This delay in responding is tragic. Children forced to drink and bathe in the contaminated water face life-long health and developmental consequences. These consequences were intensified each day the crisis lingered. In short, a crisis that was bad from the outset became much worse because of this unwillingness to take immediate corrective action.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time for you to determine if the agencies involved in Flint's water crisis communicated effectively. Did their communication provide a sense of false certainty? Was clear, honest, and open communication practiced? First, take a moment to refresh in your mind the lessons established in Chapter 5 for managing crisis uncertainty. These lessons should guide you in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of communication within the Flint water crisis.

Lessons on Managing Crisis Uncertainty

Lesson 1: Organization members must accept that a crisis can start quickly and unexpectedly.

- Should the agencies involved in managing Flint's water have viewed the initial water issues as a potential crisis?
- When was the crisis acknowledged?

Lesson 2: Organizations should not respond to crises with routine solutions.

- Were the responses by the agencies involved in Flint's water crisis routine?

Lesson 3: Threat is perceptual.

- How did the public perceive the threat of contaminated water?

Lesson 4: Crisis communicators must communicate early and often following a crisis regardless of whether they have critical information about the crisis.

- Did governmental agencies communicate early and often about the water issues?

Lesson 5: Organizations should not purposely heighten the ambiguity of a crisis to deceive or distract the public.

- Were any issues uncertain or ambiguous for the public? Did these change overtime?
- Did agencies response(s) to water issues influence the way the crisis developed?

Lesson 6: Be prepared to defend your interpretation of the evidence surrounding a crisis.

- Did agencies defend their interpretation of the water crisis in a way that was ethical?

Lesson 7: Without good intentions prior to a crisis, recovery is difficult or impossible.

- Were strong relationships present with Flint residents prior to the water crisis?
- Based on communication, do you think Flint residents saw involved agencies as holding good intentions?

Lesson 8: If you believe you are not responsible for a crisis, you need to build a case for who is responsible and why.

- Who is responsible for Flint's water contamination issues?

Lesson 9: Organizations need to prepare for uncertainty through simulations and training.

- Were agencies prepared for Flint's water crisis?
- Was there any evidence that training for such a crisis could have prevented this event?

Lesson 10: Crises challenge the way organizations think about and conduct their business.

- Do you think the water crisis in Flint will change the way these crises are handled in the future? If so, how?

Example 6.6. FUKUSHIMA Daiichi: Uncertainty Created by Three Interrelated Crisis Events

The Fukushima Daiichi disaster on March 11, 2011, was among the most significant nuclear accidents in recent history. The disaster was really three events that interacted with each other. First came the Tōhoku magnitude nine earthquake that created a tsunami. The tsunami then resulted in an industrial accident at the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant.

According to the International Nuclear Event Scale, the disaster was a Level 7 event, the most severe. Equipment failures at the plant occurred because generators, located in the basement, were flooded and failed. Without electricity, pumps to circulate water to cool the reactor could not be operated. This led to a nuclear meltdown and ultimately to releases of radioactive materials into the air and water. The disaster went on for some time, and it was not until December 16 that the plant was declared stable. Several workers were seriously hurt, and many were exposed to high levels of radiation. Almost 18,500 people died from the devastation of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. Only a few were immediately hurt by the Fukushima disaster, but the broader and long-term impact of the radiation exposure is unknown.

The greatest concern of a radiological event is the impact of public health through exposure. Evacuations and shelter in place are the most typical ways in which exposure can be limited. A four-level evacuation process was put in place, but the Japanese government changed evacuation notices as the crisis developed.

On the first day, 134,000 people were evacuated, and four days later, an additional 354,000 were evacuated. Information released by the Japanese government was delayed and in some cases inaccurate. Some suggested that the government and the plant's owner, the Tokyo Electric Power Company, sought to downplay the risks. The government's final report on the disaster found a number of problems with the way information was provided to the public. Initially, the government tried to downplay the disaster for fear of creating panic and even disputed the use of the term "reactor meltdown" by the media.

Most observers agree that the company operating the plant, TEPCO, was not well prepared and was too slow in its response. The government and TEPCO did not coordinate their communication, and the crisis communication plans seemed inadequate and incomplete. There were few appropriate guidelines for how to communicate with the public about radiological events. Japan in general takes disasters very seriously, because the country is so prone to earthquakes. September 1 is designated Disaster Preparedness Day and is set aside for drills and exercises for organizations and government agencies. For the first 10 days of the Fukushima Daiichi event, little information

was available, and then when the information was provided about the level of radiation exposure, it was highly technical and could not easily be understood by the public. Japanese scientists were also reluctant to discuss the disaster for fear of creating yet more confusion and uncertainty.

In addition, radiation exposure is generally very frightening to people, because it is both unseen and exotic. It can persist for a very long time and come through the air, water, and food. Low levels of exposure generally pose very limited risks, while high levels of exposure for extended periods of time can create a number of serious health problems, including birth defects and cancer. We are all exposed to radiation every day. Cell phones, security scans, smoke detectors, microwaves, and power lines all emit radiation. Most of us have had x-rays taken for medical purposes. Despite the fact that we are all exposed to radiation, most people become concerned, some would say unduly concerned, about radiation.

Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster



Source: REUTERS/Mainichi Shimbun

The fear about radiation, the uncertainty about the levels of release, the exposure, trauma, and destruction from the earthquake and tsunami created a very challenging context for communication. The confusion about who should provide information resulted in the public being denied access to critical information.

Summary

The complexity and unusual precipitating events for the start of the crisis at Fukushima initiated great uncertainty during this crisis. The lack of preparedness by the nuclear power plant followed by the high uncertainty of the crisis led to several missteps by TEPCO, the company that managed the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. The lack of preparation and ineffective communication skills for managing the uncertainty of the crisis enraged the general public and the global audience. The response also created industry-wide questions about the role of nuclear power and radiation levels in our lives.

You Make the Call

The Fukushima Daiichi disaster is generally described as a complex event because it involved natural disasters and an industrial accident. It also created a great deal of uncertainty. What were some of the other factors that made this event so uncertain? Can you think of other cases where a crisis may involve the interactions of risks that create high uncertainty? First, take a moment to refresh in your mind the lessons established in Chapter 5 for managing crisis uncertainty. These lessons should guide you in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of Fukushima's crisis response.

Lessons on Managing Crisis Uncertainty

Lesson 1: Organization members must accept that a crisis can start quickly and unexpectedly.

- How did the Fukushima crisis create uncertainty through a quick and unexpected start to the crisis?

Lesson 2: Organizations should not respond to crises with routine solutions.

- Were there routine responses available for the Fukushima disaster?

Lesson 3: Threat is perceptual.

- How did perceptions about the dangers of radiation contamination impact this event?

Lesson 4: Crisis communicators must communicate early and often following a crisis regardless of whether they have critical information about the crisis.

- Did the TEPCO officials communicate early and often? What were some of the factors influencing how quickly and often they communicated?

Lesson 5: Organizations should not purposely heighten the ambiguity of a crisis to deceive or distract the public.

- How did the complexity of this event impact the ambiguity of the situation? What communication approaches would be most helpful in a case such as the Fukushima Daiichi disaster where there is high uncertainty and the situation is changing?

Lesson 6: Be prepared to defend your interpretation of the evidence surrounding a crisis.

- How should TEMPCO and Japanese officials have defended their interpretations regarding safe levels of radiation exposure? How should they have discussed their interpretations of evacuations?

Lesson 7: Without good intentions prior to a crisis, recovery is difficult or impossible.

- What is the perception of the nuclear power industry? Have other events called the intentions of the industry into question?

Lesson 8: If you believe you are not responsible for a crisis, you need to build a case for who is responsible and why.

- Was there a need to build a case regarding responsibility during this crisis?

Lesson 9: Organizations need to prepare for uncertainty through simulations

and training.

- How would you describe Japan's level of preparedness for this disaster?

Lesson 10: Crises challenge the way organizations think about and conduct their business.

- Did the Fukushima Daiichi disaster change the way people think about nuclear energy? If so, how?

7 Lessons on Effective Crisis Leadership

The third content chapter in this section of our book describes effective crisis leadership and how a leader should communicate during crises. Previously we discussed lessons on producing effective crisis communication along with managing uncertainty effectively. We believe the ability to manage a crisis is a critical leadership skill and in the future, leaders will be called on more and more to respond to the threat and opportunity of crises. Crisis leadership, then, is a critical management skill. We begin this chapter by defining and describing leadership and crisis leadership. We then focus on 10 strategies for crisis leadership. The first set of lessons focuses on some of the functions of leadership during crisis. For instance, leaders need to be visible and engaged during and after a crisis; they need to develop strong, positive relationships with stakeholders; their responses need to be empathetic and create opportunities for transformation and renewal; and they should build cooperation following a crisis. The next group of lessons provides some advice and guidance for managing crises. Specifically, this section examines how poor leadership can make a crisis much worse, how leadership styles are much different during times of crisis, and how leaders have specific communication obligations in responding to, managing, resolving, and learning from crisis.

The Importance of Effective Leadership

Most of us place a great deal of faith in our leaders. Whether they are business leaders, political leaders, or leaders of religious or social groups, leaders are important representatives of their groups, organizations, and communities. We look to our leaders for direction, inspiration, motivation, resources, support, and comfort. Leaders establish a clear vision, communicate that vision with others, collect and distribute information and knowledge, and coordinate the efforts of others. Leaders serve as cheerleaders and motivators. They represent their organization. They select, train, coach, and mentor employees. Leaders reflect and strengthen the organizational culture and serve as models. Leaders give us clues about how to behave, about what is right, and about what things mean. They promote ethical conduct and serve as moral guides. Sometimes, we expect our leaders to be almost superhuman in their abilities to solve problems and create positive outcomes.

Many definitions of leadership exist, and these definitions have changed over time as society has changed. Communication researcher Peter Northouse (2012) identified four characteristics that most definitions of leadership share. First, it is a process, suggesting it is ongoing and changing. While most of us think of a leader as a person, leadership is really a set of behaviors that is most often associated with a specific person. Leadership needs change based on the conditions. A crisis is a condition that requires specific leadership behaviors. Second, leadership involves influencing follower behaviors and perceptions. Motivation and direction are some of the most important leadership activities. Leadership also occurs in groups, organizations, or community contexts. These different levels of leadership can be very important to getting things done. Finally, leadership is directed toward goals and achieving specific outcomes that are seen as important. We define *leadership* as a communication and influence process directed toward followers who are members of a group, organization, or community, to assist in achieving some goal or outcome.

Leaders are always important to the success of organizations. During a crisis, they take on even more importance. We think of leadership as an attractor helping reduce the turmoil of the crisis and reasserting order and stability. This happens, in part, by being visible to employees, members of the community, and the media. Leaders may oversee responses and help others cope with what is happening. One critical function for a leader during a crisis is to explain what is happening, create understanding, and show others how to respond and move forward. During a crisis, the leader may become an emergency manager coordinating response efforts, providing comfort and reassurance, disseminating information, speaking to the media, and providing a vision for response, recovery, and renewal. The goals in the case of a crisis are to contain and limit harm, assist those who have been harmed, move beyond the crisis in an appropriate manner, and learn and grow from the experience. Learning and growing is especially important

to finding the crisis opportunities. We describe 10 lessons of effective leadership during a crisis.

> Lesson 1
>
> Effective leadership is critical to a crisis response.

Why Visibility Following a Crisis Is Important

When the tragic shooting occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012, President Obama was very visible following the massacre. In this time of great tragedy, the country needed to hear from the president. In these cases, the president is sometimes described as the comforter-in-chief, because of the role of expressing grief and offering support to the country. He sought to fill the role of comforter-in-chief, in part by quoting scripture.

"To all the families, first responders, to the community of Newtown, clergy, guests— Scripture tells us: ' . . . do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away . . . inwardly we are being renewed day by day.' . . . Here in Newtown, I come to offer the love and prayers of a nation. I am very mindful that mere words cannot match the depths of your sorrow, nor can they heal your wounded hearts. I can only hope it helps for you to know that you're not alone in your grief; that our world too has been torn apart; that all across this land of ours, we have wept with you, we've pulled our children tight." (Obama, 2012)

President Obama was able, through his leadership, to express the grief the entire nation was feeling from this terrible tragedy. He created a sense of unity by saying that everyone was sharing in the sense of deep and profound sadness.

There are many other examples of successful crisis leaders. In one of the most thoroughly studied examples of public relations and crisis management, James Burke, the CEO for the drug company Johnson & Johnson, took decisive action following a crisis. In 1982, 13 people died from Tylenol capsules laced with cyanide. Sales of Tylenol capsules, the company's most profitable product, were decimated by a product-tampering crisis. Moving fast to save its product, the company withdrew all the Tylenol from stores. CEO Burke then appeared on the *Phil Donahue Show*, the most popular television talk show at that time, to explain that the company had nothing to do with the poisoning. He also openly described detailed plans to ensure that no such tampering could ever occur again. The company soon introduced a redesigned, tamper-proof, triple-sealed package (Benson, 1988; Snyder & Foster, 1983). This insured that tampering could not happen again.

Tylenol sales rebounded, largely because of the credibility of Burke's statement and the personal reassurance he offered. His direct and honest message to the public was widely recognized as an example of effective crisis public relations and leadership. He built credibility and goodwill through his appearance on the *Phil Donahue Show*, and this goodwill helped the company survive.

This case illustrates that leaders must be actively engaged during a crisis. They should

be visible and accessible to the media. They should be responsive to the needs of victims. They should be actively engaged in the response. They need to speak to the public. This communication helps convey that the crisis is being actively managed and reduces the impression that the company has something to hide. In fact, it is often appropriate for the leader to serve as the crisis spokesperson, although he or she should work with other members of the crisis team and be trained in crisis communication.

One of the questions leaders must face during crises is how visible they should be. Leaders sometimes feel the impulse to withdraw during crises, particularly when they believe that they might be blamed. This tendency to circle the wagons is understandable but can make the crisis much worse. Sometimes they just don't know what to say or don't have enough information about what is happening. When leaders withdraw, they cut themselves off from important information and increase the uncertainty. The public may perceive that there is something to hide. Some leaders may also be hesitant to honestly and openly discuss the circumstances of the crises for fear of making the situation worse. However, the actions of leaders like President Obama and James Burke illustrate that being open and honest are important leadership behaviors during a crisis. Transparency and honesty also build trust, credibility, and support.

The media spotlight during a crisis can be very stressful for a leader who isn't prepared or is inexperienced. Social media can greatly intensify the stress. One reason organizations sometimes choose to circle the wagons is because they are afraid to face the media. There are some strategies that can increase the chances of communicating successfully with the media. First, recognize that you have no choice but to face the media. A crisis is usually news, and the media will cover the story with or without you. Second, if you are open, honest, and courteous with reporters, then they will usually respond in similar ways. It's also important to recognize that communicating with the media is necessary to reach other important audiences, like customers, the community, and the public. Social media can be used to directly communicate with the public. Finally, always be sure to express concern and empathy for those harmed by the crisis. This does not mean that you are accepting responsibility or blame; it simply means your organization is human, empathetic, and caring.

> Lesson 2
>
> Leaders should be visible during a crisis.

Developing Networks of Support

In another important case, CEO of General Motors Mary Barra was able to help the company survive a recall that eventually included almost 30 million cars worldwide. Faulty ignition switches had been associated with 124 deaths and the company was facing major lawsuits, congressional investigations, and loss of consumer confidence. Barra was the first female CEO of the massive car company, and she had been named to that post only a few months before the crisis broke. She was open and honest in her response to the crisis. Speaking to employees soon after the news broke she said, "Something went wrong with our process in this instance, and terrible things happened . . . We will be better because of this tragic situation if we seize the opportunity. And I believe we will do just that" (Vlasic & Jensen, 2014).

In this way, she looked forward to ways the crisis could promote learning and renewal. Later, when testifying before Congress, she said, "Today's GM will do the right thing. That begins with my sincere apologies to everyone who has been affected by this recall, especially the families and friends (of those) who lost their lives or were injured. I am deeply sorry" (GM Corporate Newsroom, 2014).

Leaders often avoid making direct apologies like this because they fear creating more legal liability. Barra chose to be very open and direct.

As with James Burke in the Johnson & Johnson case, Mary Barra was visible in her efforts to build support for the company. She was honest and direct in explaining the mistakes the company made. She apologized for what happened. She also described her plans for insuring that GM would never make these kinds of mistakes again. This included creating new procedures and safeguards for identifying defective products. While GM had fallen on hard times, it had long-established relationships with customers, communities, suppliers, unions, banks, and even competitors. These relationships and the company's long history of success represented a kind of reservoir of goodwill and legitimacy that it used during the crisis. This reservoir of goodwill, positive reputation, and credibility is often essential to surviving a crisis. Mary Barra built credibility by admitting mistakes and showing that the company would fix the problems. She was a very effective and natural communicator, and her honesty and openness in communication saved the company.

In another example, Michael McCain, CEO of the Canadian company Maple Leaf Foods, managed a 2008 recall of its products linked to a serious outbreak of foodborne illness. The outbreak was linked to nine confirmed and 11 suspected deaths. Rather than try to deny responsibility and limit the recall, McCain actually voluntarily expanded the recall of 23 of its products, to all 220 packaged meat products produced at the plant, where the contamination occurred. McCain was highly visible, holding

several press conferences. Company spokespersons did interviews, and the CEO posted a public apology on its website and on YouTube. In it he said, “To those people who have become ill, and to the families who have lost loved ones, I want to express my deepest and most sincere sympathies. Words cannot begin to express our sadness for your pain” (McCain, 2008). McCain used social media to be visible and open during this crisis.

> Lesson 3
>
> Leaders should work to develop a positive company reputation during normal times to build a reservoir of goodwill.

Being Available, Open, and Honest

These examples show that crisis leadership is a critical skill for many managers. Leadership is important for managing and recovering from all kinds of crises, including product tampering, near bankruptcy, and even terrorist attacks. In all cases and in all organizational contexts, engaged, open, and honest leadership is critical to successful crisis management.

James Lee Witt, former director of the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), explains, however, that crisis "communication is more than talking—it's the honest and open exchange of personal views" (Witt & Morgan, 2002, p. 49). Honesty and openness can be difficult during a crisis, if the organization has done something wrong. As we described earlier, there is a natural tendency to circle the wagons or batten down the hatches during a crisis. Where there is a history of wrongdoing, as with the General Motors ignition switches, the natural first impulse may be to hide the wrongdoing. Company attorneys often advise leaders to say as little as possible following a crisis. They typically argue that any statement about the crisis can be used against the organization and may increase the organization's liability. Mary Barra chose to be open and honest and apologize for the crisis. In the case of Maple Leaf Foods, CEO Michael McCain specifically noted that he ignored the advice of both his lawyers and accountants in deciding how to respond to the crisis. Failure to be open and honest usually compounds the crisis and makes the media even more aggressive and the public more suspicious. Stakeholders may also become angry if they think an organization is trying to shift blame and avoid responsibility. In the long run, failure to be open, honest, and forthcoming usually makes matters worse for a company.

> Lesson 4
>
> Leaders should be open and honest following a crisis.

The Impact of Leadership on Renewal Following a Crisis

The experiences of General Motors, Johnson & Johnson, and Maple Leaf Foods are examples of organizations that were able to recreate themselves, not just surviving their crises but subsequently thriving and achieving even more success. General Motors soon returned to profitability. Johnson & Johnson actually built market share after the poisonings. Michael McCain was named CEO of the year, and his company also added market share. These examples illustrate that, when a crisis is managed successfully and when managers are open and honest and draw on a set of strong core values, crises can actually serve as renewing forces.

Companies facing crisis are forced to reexamine basic goals and values. Support regarding money, resources, and goodwill may come to an organization following a crisis if it is managed successfully. A crisis can create an opportunity to change fundamental operations and activities. Fires or explosions, for example, provide opportunities to rebuild facilities and acquire new, modern equipment. A crisis may create opportunities for a company to be more visible. In some cases, customers choose to buy products to help out a company facing a crisis. General Motors went through a devastating bankruptcy in 2009, when it was caught in a very significant economic downturn. The company came out of bankruptcy a much leaner, stronger, and profitable company. The crisis created an opportunity for renewal.

> Lesson 5
>
> Leaders who manage crises successfully may create opportunities for renewal.

Ineffective Leadership During a Crisis

While the cases of Michael McCain, James Burke, and Mary Barra are success stories, there are many more cases of leaders failing to successfully communicate and manage crises. In fact, leaders are often part of the crisis; when this is true, their efforts may actually backfire and make things worse.

As we discussed in Chapter 5, when Exxon's tanker *Valdez* ran into an Alaskan reef in 1989, spilling 1.5 million gallons of crude oil, Exxon CEO Lawrence Rawl's response made the environmental damage much worse. He decided early on not to visit the scene of the spill, thereby indicating to many observers that he thought the problem was insignificant. He then sought to shift blame for the spill to the *Valdez* captain and blame for cleanup failure to decisions made by the State of Alaska. At the very time when cooperation was needed, Rawl became engaged in a public dispute with Alaska's Governor Cowper. The Exxon *Valdez* oil spill is generally recognized as a public relations disaster, one compounded by Rawl's behavior.

In 2010, Tony Hayward, CEO of BP during the Gulf Coast oil spill crisis, received much criticism for his crisis communication. Hayward's ineffective leadership communication started with a delayed response that minimized the severity of the spill. He also made mistakes by stating that "he wanted his life back" in a public interview about the crisis (Chen, 2010, para. 5). Not only was the content of Hayward's message ineffective but so too was the form of his response. While the Gulf Coast fishermen and residents suffered the effects of the oil spill, Hayward was photographed at a glitzy yacht race in England. Ultimately, Hayward was criticized for his lack of transparency, a lack of crisis planning, a delayed response that initially minimized the scope of the crisis, and a lack of empathy to those impacted by the crisis.

In another classic example of poor crisis leadership, Firestone CEO John Lampe and Ford CEO Jack Nassar became involved in a public fight over a series of accidents involving Ford Explorers equipped with Firestone tires. Lampe blamed the Ford Explorer for a series of rollover accidents; Nassar blamed Firestone tires (see Venette, Sellnow, & Lang, 2003). The public brawl not only ended a 95-year relationship between the two companies, but it also seriously damaged the reputations of both companies. As Ford and Firestone exchanged charges and countercharges, the public was left with the impression that both companies were more interested in avoiding responsibility than in solving the problem or protecting consumers. Negative publicity was prolonged for many months, and the public squabble made it almost impossible to find the real cause of the problem.

During the recent economic downturn that reached epic proportions in 2008, many Wall Street executives failed to acknowledge the crisis until it was too late, failed in

their responsibilities to be visible and engaged, and in many cases, failed to change their usual approaches to doing business. The result was several bankruptcies and further damage to Wall Street's already very negative reputation.

In another well-publicized crisis, the Catholic Church faced a series of scandals beginning in 2001 through 2002 regarding accusation of sexual abuse on the part of priests. In many cases, church leaders had covered up the abuse, even when it was reported to them and even when the allegations involved children. According to *BostonGlobe.com*, "Victims who came forward with abuse claims were ignored or paid off, while accused priests were quietly transferred from parish to parish or sent for brief periods of psychological counseling" ("Spotlight Investigation," n.d., para. 2). In 2002, the United State Conference of Catholic Bishops passed new rules and guidelines for dealing with accusations of abuse. Critics pointed out, however, that many of these bishops had at one point covered up accusations of abuse. The failure of the Catholic Church to protect children and young people from abuse and the long-term practice of cover-ups seriously damaged the reputation of the church. Many victims sued, and many Catholics withheld their donations.

In the fall of 2015, the Volkswagen emissions scandal broke. The company admitted to installing software that would defeat government emissions tests on more than a half million diesel cars in the United States—and roughly 10.5 million more worldwide. While the company admitted wrongdoing, it sought to shift blame to a few rogue engineers and suspended four employees. Later the company was forced to acknowledge that the scandal was broader and included several top executives. The scandal will cost the company in excess of $20 billion.

Leaders who deny that problems exist, who seek to cover up problems, or who simply try to minimize the crisis or shift the blame risk creating more damage. If a problem is not fixed, it may become much worse. If leaders do not act to take responsibility and actively manage crises, they can create the impression that they do not care about those who have been harmed and are only concerned about profits and avoiding blame.

Lesson 6

Leaders should cooperate with stakeholders during a crisis and should work to build consensus.

Lesson 7

Poor leadership, including denials, cover-ups, or lack of response, can make a crisis much worse.

What Makes an Effective Crisis Leader?

Leadership has been the object of study for thousands of years. Even the ancient Egyptians were fascinated by leadership. The ancient Chinese military leader Sun Tzu wrote about the qualities of a successful leader, as did the medieval European writer Machiavelli. Modern researchers in management, political science, sociology, psychology, and communication have continued to study leadership using a variety of methods and theories. This research has developed over time as society has changed. A number of theories of leadership have been developed to help explain leadership. Three general approaches to crisis leadership are discussed here.

Leadership Styles

Researchers have examined the ways leaders behave and how they communicate (Northouse, 2012). They have found that all leaders do not behave the same way and that there is a great deal of difference from leader to leader. Various kinds of leader behavior and communication have been classified as specific styles of leadership.

For example, some leaders are very directive in giving orders and issuing instructions. They generally ask for little input from followers and make decisions based largely on their own opinions, values, and information. This is generally described as an *authoritarian leadership style*. Authoritarian leaders are much more directive in telling followers what to do and very specific when describing how tasks should be done.

In other cases, leaders are more open to the ideas and suggestions of others. They rarely make decisions without asking for input and suggestions, and they try and build consensus. These leaders are also less likely to be directive and are more likely to offer suggestions or come up with more general goals for followers. This is called a *democratic leadership style*.

A third form of leadership is called *laissez faire* or a *non-leadership style*. In this style, the leader exhibits few of the characteristics associated with leadership and may be a leader in name only, generally allowing followers to do whatever they want without direction or, in many cases, without supervision. Followers have more freedom and autonomy and are often expected to be self-directed.

There is some evidence to suggest that during a crisis, authoritarian leadership styles may be more effective than other styles. People may want more directive leadership to counteract the uncertainty and confusion associated with a crisis situation. An authoritarian leader may create a stronger impression of control; however, they may also risk alienating followers and other stakeholders.

While the styles of leadership are useful in explaining what a leader actually does, many particularly effective leaders do not act the same in every context. This conclusion leads to another view of leadership: the contingency approach.

Contingency Approach to Leadership

Contingency leadership suggests that different leadership situations require different kinds of leadership. For example, when the leader has good relationships with followers, the situation may call for a different style of leadership than in circumstances when the leader has poor follower relationships. In some situations, a task may be clearly structured with easily identifiable steps to achieving a desired goal, while in others, the situation is unclear and uncertain. Again, the style of leadership in these cases may be different. A third factor in contingency models of leadership is the power of the leader. Often during a crisis, leaders are given extra authority and power so they may quickly contain and limit the harm.

Crises are unique situations and require different leadership approaches. As mentioned earlier, during a crisis, the situation is usually uncertain and confusing. In some instances, authoritarian leadership may be seen as an appropriate effort to take control, particularly when there are clear and simple actions that must be undertaken quickly, such as evacuation. When the situation is seen as an emergency, leaders often have more power to move quickly and take action. In other situations, the leader may be interacting with new groups, and sometimes these groups are angry and even hostile. The leader may need to build cooperation and support through more democratic styles. Getting input and building consensus takes time, so a democratic approach is more common after the immediacy of the crisis is over. As described earlier, leaders with positive reputations and high credibility are generally given more support by followers during crisis situations.

> Lesson 8
>
> Leaders must adapt their leadership styles and contingencies during crises.

Transformational Leadership

A third approach to understanding crisis leadership is called *transformational leadership*. This approach to leadership was developed by researchers studying political leaders and has expanded to many organizational contexts. James MacGregor Burns (1978) described transformational leadership as both leaders and followers coming to agree on a shared vision and shared goals. By creating agreement on core values, priorities, and what should be done, leaders can motivate their followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes. The success of transformational leadership is associated with the communication skill of the leader and the importance of the shared goals and values.

Earlier, we described leadership as a transformational situation when we discussed renewal. Crises can create great changes, and although most people see them as negative, these changes can also create very positive transformations. In the case of Mary Barra at General Motors that we described earlier, the crisis became an opportunity to change the company culture. Rather than trying to sweep the crisis under the rug, Barra was out front with it. At an employee town hall meeting she said, "I never want to put this behind us, I want to put this painful experience permanently in our collective memories" (Colvin, 2014). She created safer review procedures for new products, including a Global Vehicle Safety Group and a "Speak up for Safety" campaign to encourage employees to express their concerns. These actions, which are a response to the ignition crisis, have helped transform a highly bureaucratic company culture into a much more flexible organization that places a high value on vehicle safety.

We believe most crises create opportunities for transformational leadership. Sometimes, this is because of a silver lining that is created by a crisis. Often, the crisis creates opportunities to learn, or change procedures or company culture. In other cases, an entire organization can be recreated and renewed by a crisis. Renewal usually happens because a leader has stepped forward and communicated a clear set of values, a sense of common purpose, and a way forward.

Leadership Virtues

Another general approach to understanding leadership comes from the concept of virtues. *Virtues* can be understood as a predisposition to act in a positive or ethical way. A person who has the virtues of honesty and responsibility, for example, is a person who tends to act in an honest and responsible manner. This virtue ethics approach has been used since the time of Aristotle to study and teach people about moral and ethical behavior.

Virtues have also been applied to leadership and crisis leadership (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001). Returning to an earlier example, Aaron Feuerstein was the CEO of the textile company Malden Mills when it experienced a devastating fire. While the fire still burned, he made a public commitment to continue to pay his workers and rebuild the plant. This response was very consistent with earlier decisions Feuerstein had made and helped him generate the support necessary to rebuild his company. When asked why he had decided to rebuild, Feuerstein noted that it was the right thing to do (see Ulmer, 2001). The examples of Mary Barra and Michael McCain discussed earlier are other examples of corporate leaders acting in virtuous ways following a crisis.

Many effective responses to crisis are based on a personal set of values and a commitment to do the right thing. Crises are highly uncertain and stressful events, and during these kinds of circumstances, leaders can fall back on values, ethics, and virtues to determine how to respond. A virtuous response to a crisis is likely to generate support from stakeholders and is much more defensible than a response based in the need to avoid lawsuits or protect profits. A virtuous response to a crisis may enhance an organization's reputation and help a company renew itself.

Managing Uncertainty, Responding, Resolving, and Learning From Crisis

In Chapter 1, four consistent communication demands of crisis were described: managing uncertainty, responding to the crisis, resolving it, and learning from it. Each of these demands requires leaders to act and communicate effectively. Managing uncertainty, for example, requires a consistent voice, usually in the form of a crisis spokesperson, and necessitates creating and maintaining open channels of communication and information flow. As mentioned earlier, we look to leaders to actively manage a crisis, and followers expect the leader to be visible during a crisis. One of the critical behaviors of the crisis leader is to serve as a spokesperson.

Speaking as a representative of the organization to aggressive and demanding media while the uncertainty of a crisis still prevails is not easy. Many leaders are not well prepared to serve as spokespersons. They are not natural communicators and may come across as cold and uncaring. Many CEOs will undergo media training before a crisis. This training usually focuses on responding to intense media questioning, understanding the needs of the media during a crisis, and strategies for how to respond to questions effectively, even when all the facts aren't known and where questions of responsibility and liability may be raised. Training will often put leaders in mock press conferences or staged interviews where reporters ask tough questions. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has conducted extensive interviews with community leaders who have managed crises. They recommend following the six principles of STARCC: (1) Simple messages are important during a crisis when people may have difficulty processing information. (2) Timely messages are critical during a crisis. (3) Accuracy requires straightforward direct messages. (4) Relevant messages address the most immediate concerns. (5) Credibility builds trust that is essential to effective crisis communication. Finally, (6) consistency is the hallmark of effective crisis communication. Additional guidelines for a crisis spokesperson are presented below.

Suggestions for the Leader as Spokesperson

- Don't let the media push you into saying things that you do not want to say, but don't become angry with the media.
- Express concern for anyone harmed by the crisis.
- Avoid the phrase "no comment."
- If you don't have the answer to a question, say so but indicate that you are working to find the answer.
- Don't speak with certainty unless you are absolutely sure of all the facts.
- Be sure to point out the uncertainty of situations with phrases such as, "The situation is evolving" or "We don't have all the facts yet."
- Don't hesitate to involve others on the crisis team when you don't know the answer.

As we described earlier, many leaders withdraw and limit external contact during a crisis situation. Sometimes managers may believe they should focus their attention internally and avoid interacting with any outside groups including the media during the crises. But one of the principal features of managing uncertainty is to facilitate the flow of information. Crisis leaders should reach out to a variety of groups and agencies during a crisis. Often, this simply means making phone calls, asking for help, giving an update, or offering to coordinate. At times, this outreach means identifying liaisons or creating coordinating groups so that everyone has access to information. What is most important is that the leader remains open to information and is willing to share information with others.

Maintaining openness can also assist with the second consistent communication requirement: responding to the crisis. Part of responding to a crisis is building coalitions of support through leader openness and accessibility. In addition, crisis leaders need to be honest and forthright in their discussion of the crisis. Lawrence Rawl, CEO of Exxon, initially tried to deny the harm caused by the *Valdez* oil spill and blame others for the spill. This only served to reduce the company's credibility and prolong the damage. The effort to shift the blame to others created additional harm and resentment.

As described earlier, one way to generate support for a crisis is to use a virtuous, value-based response reflecting values that most stakeholders admire. For example, a response that is focused primarily on helping those who have been harmed by a crisis is likely to generate more support than those responses designed to shift or avoid blame. In the case of 2005's Hurricane Katrina, much of the communication by public officials was directed toward shifting blame among FEMA, the State of Louisiana, and the City of New Orleans. The needs of the victims were secondary. A virtuous response by leaders grounded more fully in the values of helping those who had lost their homes

and livelihoods may have been more effective. In addition, a virtuous response may have helped generate more support and cooperation for rebuilding and renewal.

Resolving the crisis, the third consistent communication demand, usually requires specific actions to offset the harm. Action may need to be taken to limit the injury to consumers, employees, or members of the community. Leaders may need to apologize publicly. During and after a crisis, leaders have specific obligations and duties to others. These may include victims, employees, stockholders, regulatory agencies, members of the community, and other crisis stakeholders. In general, crisis resolution may also require that there be an agreed-upon explanation of what caused the crisis. Determination of blame and responsibility usually impacts insurance settlements and legal liability. Sometimes, renewal and rebuilding are postponed until questions of blame are resolved. If the leader is associated with the cause, he or she may also be held responsible for the crisis. It is not uncommon for leaders to step down from their positions following crises.

A final crisis communication demand is to learn from the crisis. Unfortunately, many organizations fail to learn from the crises they experience and repeat the same mistakes again and again. After a crisis has been resolved, leaders have the important responsibility of interpreting the lessons of the crisis and communicating them throughout the organization. For leaders such as Lee Iacocca, Rudolph Giuliani, and Aaron Feuerstein, crises are life-changing experiences that include fundamental lessons about how to manage and lead, how to avoid risk, how to respond to crisis, and what is most important. By communicating the lessons, leaders enhance safety and prevention, increase an organization's vigilance, and demonstrate its values.

Lesson 9

A virtuous response to a crisis by the organization's leaders may be the most effective in generating support and renewal.

Lesson 10

Leaders have specific communication obligations and duties for managing and learning from crises.

Lessons on Effective Crisis Leadership

Lesson 1: Effective leadership is critical to overcoming a crisis.
Lesson 2: Leaders should be visible during a crisis.
Lesson 3: Leaders should work to develop a positive company reputation during normal times to build a reservoir of goodwill.
Lesson 4: Leaders should be open and honest following a crisis.

Lesson 5: Leaders who manage crises successfully may create opportunities for renewal.

Lesson 6: Leaders should cooperate with stakeholders during a crisis and should work to build consensus.

Lesson 7: Poor leadership, including denials, cover-ups, or lack of response, can make a crisis much worse.

Lesson 8: Leaders must adapt their leadership styles and contingencies during crises.

Lesson 9: A virtuous response to a crisis by the organization's leaders may be the most effective in generating support and renewal.

Lesson 10: Leaders have specific communication obligations for managing and learning from crises.

Summary

Even during the best of times and the most normal of circumstances, leadership is a demanding and complex process. During the stress, uncertainty, and harm, the demands, obligations, and duties of leadership are even more complex. This chapter explains that effective crisis leadership can create opportunities for renewal. Conversely, ineffective leadership can cause a crisis or make a crisis much worse. Crisis leadership can be understood by studying approaches or styles or by examining crisis situations as contingencies of leadership. In addition, crisis leadership may be understood as a set of specific activities. Regardless of how crisis leadership is approached, leaders should be visible, open, and honest. They should cooperate with others, work to build a reservoir of goodwill, and explore opportunities for renewal.

8 Applying the Lessons for Developing Effective Crisis Leadership

Effective leadership is critical to producing effective crisis communication. The previous chapter outlined the key crisis communication functions of an effective leader. What follows are six cases that examine in depth the role of leadership in crisis communication. This chapter begins with a case of the Peanut Corporation of America response to its devastating salmonella outbreak in 2008 and 2009. The second case examines a fire at a lumber mill and the owner's virtuous leadership response to the crisis. The third case describes a food-borne illness outbreak at a frozen food company and how a guiding vision by the owner set effective crisis communication in motion. The fourth case presents Freedom Industries and West Virginia American Water in their efforts to resolve a contamination of a large community's drinking water. The fifth case explains the leadership failures in the United Airlines' violent removal of passenger, Dr. David Dao. Finally, this chapter presents an examination of SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment response to a crisis initiated by the tragic death of trainer, Dawn Brancheau. Good luck with working through these cases while developing your crisis communication skills and experience at the same time.

Example 8.1. The Sweeping Impact of a Contaminated Food Ingredient: Peanut Corporation of America

The first set of tests returned to plant managers of Peanut Corporation of America (PCA) indicated that the peanut product was contaminated with salmonella. Rather than discarding the tainted product, PCA sent additional samples to another testing facility. When the second set of tests failed to detect salmonella, PCA officials made the decision to ship the tainted product to various food makers where it was used in 2008 as an ingredient in other products. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States explains that salmonella is a form of bacteria that is transferred to humans when food items are contaminated with animal feces. Those who ingest salmonella can develop salmonellosis, leading to "diarrhea, fever, and abdominal cramps" (CDC, 2009, para. 1). After experiencing extreme discomfort for four to seven days, most victims of salmonellosis fully recover. The condition can be fatal, however, in the very young and the very old. Salmonellosis is also life-threatening to people with some preexisting health conditions. Investigations conducted later revealed that the retesting and eventual shipment of products initially identified as contaminated was done repeatedly at the PCA plant (Millner, 2011).

PCA was a major producer of peanut meal, peanut butter, and peanut paste for use as ingredients in a wide variety of products. When the contaminated ingredients left the PCA processing plant, the managers knew it would be an ingredient in such food items as "brownies, cakes, pies, many types of candy, cereals, cookies, crackers, donuts, dressings and seasonings, prepared fruit and vegetable precuts, ice creams, peanut butter and products, pet foods, prepackaged meals, snack bars, snack mixes, and toppings" (Wittenberger & Dohlman, 2010, p. 4). With such a diversity of products and companies receiving the contaminated product, it was only a matter of time before a major crisis would erupt.

In September of 2008, the CDC identified a pattern of salmonellosis cases in a dozen states. Further investigations revealed the peanut ingredients shipped earlier by PCA were the source of the outbreak. In December of 2008, the first death caused by the outbreak occurred. By this point, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was engaged in a widespread investigation of PCA, trying to determine the full reach of the contaminated ingredients. In January of 2009, PCA recalled all products shipped from its plant beginning in the summer of 2008.

Pervasiveness of the Product

Unlike many recalls, the PCA salmonella crisis was not limited to a single product. If the company had only produced an end user product such as peanut butter purchased directly by consumers, the focus of the recall could have been limited to that product. Instead, PCA produced an ingredient that was purchased by a host of companies and included in hundreds of different products purchased by consumers. By the end of February 2009, over 1,550 assorted peanut products were "removed from store shelves," and the CDC reported that over 500 people across 43 states had contracted salmonellosis, eight of whom had died (Hartman & Barrett, 2009). In its final update on the crisis, the CDC (2010) reported a total of 714 confirmed cases of salmonellosis in 46 states. The communication challenges associated with the crisis expanded and intensified with the discovery of every new contaminated product (Millner & Sellnow, 2013, p. 264).

PCA's Crisis Response

Aside from announcing the recall, PCA remained largely silent through the crisis, offering no "instructing information, apology, remorse, or even an explanation" (Millner, Veil, & Sellnow, 2011). Instructing information is helpful during a foodborne crisis such as this because, without a clear explanation of which products are safe, the consumers lack the information needed to protect themselves (Sellnow, Sellnow, Lane, & Littlefield, 2012). Hallman and Cuite (2009) explain that when consumers "cannot successfully distinguish affected from unaffected products, they are likely to either underreact by assuming that they do not own any of the recalled products or overreact by discarding or avoiding the purchase of anything that resembles it" (p. 4). PCA's reticence contributed to two problems as the recall expanded. First, the ingredient was used in so many products that consumers had a difficult time comprehending the full extent of the recall. Second, many consumers incorrectly assumed that peanut butter sold under such names as Jif or Peter Pan were contaminated with salmonella. In response, the FDA launched a website that listed all contaminated products. For efficiency, the site was designed so that consumers could also enter the name of a product in a search box on the webpage to see if it was listed. The FDA updated the website regularly, and the CDC frequently issued reports on the outbreak, including instructions for identifying and responding to the symptoms of salmonellosis. This process continued for both the FDA and CDC until the CDC announced that it was issuing its final report about the outbreak in May of 2010. Organizational leaders responsible for products such as Jif and Peter Pan peanut butter "began costly ad campaigns to reassure the public" (Phillips, 2009) alerting the public that their products were not associated with PCA in any way and were never part of the recall.

PCA's silence continued as the investigation into the contamination deepened. Notably, during a February 2009 congressional hearing, PCA's owner and the plant manager both refused to testify, pleading the Fifth Amendment (CNN, 2009). The CDC, FDA, and some industry leaders, such as Jif and Peter Pan, communicated admirably in the absence of information from PCA. Millner, Veil, and Sellnow (2011) label such third party sources of critical information during crises *proxy communicators*. Although proxy communicators can effectively fill the void created when an organization in crisis chooses to remain mute, this substitution is not without problems. For example, proxy communicators such as CDC and FDA lacked immediate access to critical information about where products were shipped and when. Thus, as third parties involved in the crisis, proxy communicators face inherent delays that can allow the crisis to intensify (Millner, Veil, & Sellnow, 2011). As for the PCA owner and plant managers involved in shipping the tainted product, all pleaded not guilty and their trials were still underway when this book went into production. As you contemplate the questions that follow, consider the extent to which the proxy communicators were eventually able to satisfy the informational needs of consumers during the crisis.

Representative Greg Walden, right, holds up a container of food items recalled due to the salmonella outbreak associated with peanut products manufactured by the Peanut Corporation of America.



Source: AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite.

Summary

The PCA case offers valuable lessons for responding to foodborne illness crises. First, failure to communicate following a crisis has serious implications for the health and wellness of your customers and the industry in which you operate. Second, when an organization fails to communicate, it puts pressure on proxy communicators to fill that void. These proxy communicators are at a serious disadvantage when responding to crises, because they do not have direct access to information or the facts surrounding the crisis. Organizations would be wise to study the PCA case and consider the implications of silence as a strategy in crisis communication.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time to determine whether PCA or the proxy communicators communicated effectively with consumers. First, take a moment to refresh in your mind the lessons established in Chapter 7 for effective leadership during crises. These lessons should guide you in evaluating the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges in the leadership response by PCA and the proxy communicators.

Lessons on Developing Effective Leadership

Lesson 1: Effective leadership is critical to overcoming a crisis.
- Was the PCA or proxy communicator's leadership useful during the crisis?

Lesson 2: Leaders should be visible during a crisis.
- Were the PCA or the proxy communicators visible during the crisis?

Lesson 3: Leaders should work to develop a positive company reputation during normal times to build a reservoir of goodwill.
- Had the PCA worked to develop strong positive stakeholder relationships before the crisis?

Lesson 4: Leaders should be open and honest following a crisis.
- Was the PCA open and honest in its crisis response?

Lesson 5: Leaders who manage crises successfully may create opportunities for renewal.
- Did the PCA create opportunities for renewal following its crisis?

Lesson 6: Leaders should cooperate with stakeholders during a crisis and should work to build consensus.
- Did the PCA cooperate with stakeholders following the crisis?

Lesson 7: Poor leadership, including denials, cover-ups, or lack of response, can make a crisis much worse.
- Did the PCA's leadership make the crisis better or worse?

Lesson 8: Leaders must adapt their leadership styles and contingencies during crises.
- Did the PCA adapt its leadership style during the crisis?

Lesson 9: A virtuous response to a crisis by the organization's leaders may be the most effective in generating support and renewal.
- Would you describe the PCA's leadership as virtuous?

Lesson 10: Leaders have specific communication obligations for managing and learning from crises.
- How did the PCA manage the communication obligations following the crisis? Do you believe any learning took place?

Example 8.2. A Fire at Cole Hardwood

On Saturday, June 13, 1998, Cole Hardwood, a lumber mill in Logansport, Indiana, which processes green lumber from several regional lumber mills, burned. The fire, described as the largest in Indiana history, burned for over six days, putting 110 employees out of work. The fire destroyed roughly 140,000 square feet of inventory, equipment, and warehousing capacity. Milt Cole, the CEO and owner of Cole Hardwood, was well known in the community for supporting his workers and the community. What follows are some key characteristics of sole owner Milt Cole's leadership style and character.

Crisis Planning and Preparation

Milt Cole described himself as a simple man who has been blessed with success and friendship. He mentioned that employees are key to his business: "I have lots of confidence in people, people make the company. [Our key to success is to] keep people informed and have good communications" (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002, p. 133). Mr. Cole took the relationships that he developed over time with his workers and the community very seriously.

Milt Cole (personal communication, June 9, 1999) explained that the lumber industry is largely built on personal trust and credibility rather than on contractual obligations. Personal loyalty and commitment, interpersonal trust, and credibility represented Milt Cole's core business values. "I believe in taking care of people," he said. "I have a profit-sharing plan and employees have never missed a year. They made the company; I can't do it myself" (M. Cole, personal communication, June 9, 1999). Beyond the respect and responsibility Cole had for his workers, he believed in the community as well.

Milt Cole was an active community leader and philanthropist. He donated several scholarships to local colleges and chaired the local United Way fundraising campaign.

Milt Cole's leadership characteristics were obviously well established before the crisis. What follows is a description of his leadership communication following one of the most devastating experiences for his organization.

Leading Instinctively After a Disaster

Because of the fire, the company's entire stock of green and processed lumber was lost. The good news was that no one was injured; however, the main offices, along with a small retail outlet, were destroyed. In the wake of the severe damage to the buildings, equipment, and inventory, many of the workers were concerned about their jobs. Milt Cole took several communication actions following the crisis.

Watching the fires, Mr. Cole reported, "I felt gutted. That night I slept like a baby and the next day we started planning to rebuild, even before the fire was out" (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002, p. 135). It appeared as though Milt Cole knew immediately how he was going to respond to the crisis. At about 8:00 a.m. on Monday morning, while firefighters from 31 counties fought the blaze, Milt Cole announced in front of an assembly of his employees that he would pay salaries and benefits while they were unemployed and while the lumber mill was being rebuilt. "I knew it was the right thing to do," he reported (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002, p. 132).

The rebuilding effort began immediately, and the workers were split into two shifts to accommodate the lack of equipment. Over a year after the fire, Cole Hardwood was making record profits and was continuing to grow (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). Mr. Cole was able to mobilize his workforce quickly following the crisis. Once he had assembled the workers, he explained how they were going to proceed: "We never looked back. . . . There was no consideration of not rebuilding" (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001, p. 373).

Over the next year, Cole Hardwood rebuilt their lumber mill. The previous mill had been hampered by a lack of warehouse space and equipment. One consequence of Cole's response to the crisis was the opportunity to reconstruct the business in a more efficient manner, allowing for more profitability on less volume. Milt Cole capitalized on his years of experience with the old mill and made changes accordingly. The fire allowed Cole to update his mill with state-of-the-art equipment.

Milt Cole at his lumber mill in Logansport, IN



Source: Photo Courtesy of Cole Hardwood.

When asked about the plant fire after the lumber mill was rebuilt, Milt Cole explained that he experienced "the highest highs and lowest lows but I've never been prouder of anything in my life" (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001, p. 373).

Summary

Milt Cole displayed outstanding leadership following the 1998 fire at his lumber mill. It is no surprise that, following the fire, Mr. Cole displayed the character and integrity that his stakeholders had been accustomed to before the event. Milt Cole communicated consistently and early following the crisis and made himself available to his stakeholders. These characteristics and actions created a reservoir of goodwill and support for Cole Hardwood following the crisis. In addition, Milt Cole's leadership enabled the company to move beyond the plant fire. The focus following the crisis was not on blame and responsibility but rather on the opportunity for the company to renew, prosper, and grow.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time to determine whether Milt Cole exhibited the leadership qualities identified in Chapter 7. First, take a moment to refresh in your mind these leadership lessons. Second, note that these lessons serve as touchstones and discussion points for what we believe are key aspects of any approach to crisis leadership. As you answer the questions that follow, consider whether Milt Cole was effective or ineffective in his crisis leadership. We rephrased the lessons into question format so that you are better able to address the key issues in the case.

Lessons on Developing Effective Leadership

Lesson 1: Effective leadership is critical to overcoming a crisis.

- In what ways was Milt Cole's leadership critical to overcoming the crisis?

Lesson 2: Leaders should be visible during a crisis.

- In what ways was Milt Cole visible following the fire?

Lesson 3: Leaders should work to develop a positive company reputation during normal times to build a reservoir of goodwill.

- How did Milt Cole work to develop a positive reputation for his company before the fire?

Lesson 4: Leaders should be open and honest following a crisis.

- In what ways was Milt Cole open and honest following the crisis?

Lesson 5: Leaders who manage crises successfully may create opportunities for renewal.

- How did Milt Cole create opportunities for renewal following the fire?

Lesson 6: Leaders should cooperate with stakeholders during a crisis and should work to build consensus.

- Did Milt Cole cooperate with stakeholders following the fire?

Lesson 7: Poor leadership, including denials, cover-ups, or lack of response, can make a crisis much worse.

- Did Milt Cole's leadership make the crisis better or worse?

Lesson 8: Leaders must adapt their leadership styles and contingencies during crises.

- Did Milt Cole adapt his leadership style to the nature of the crisis?

Lesson 9: A virtuous response to a crisis by the organization's leaders may be the most effective in generating support and renewal.

- In what ways was Milt Cole's communication virtuous?

Lesson 10: Leaders have specific communication obligations for managing and learning from crises.

- How did Milt Cole manage the communication obligations following the fire? Did learning take place?

Example 8.3. The Largest Foodborne Illness Outbreak in History: Schwan's Sales Enterprises

In September 1994, a tanker truck owned and operated by Cliff Viessman Inc. returned to the company's Minnesota facility after hauling a load of raw eggs, which, unknown to Viessman employees, were infected with salmonella bacteria. The truck was parked and scrubbed internally by high-pressure washers. The washing, however, did not completely eliminate the bacteria, and as the contaminated truck sat idle, waiting for its next load, the bacteria multiplied. Unfortunately, for Schwan's Sales Enterprises (Schwan's), the contaminated truck's next assignment was to haul ice cream mix to the Schwan's plant in Marshall, Minnesota. The ice cream mix was severely contaminated by the time it was delivered to Schwan's. In turn, the mix contaminated every part of the Schwan's ice cream processing system that it touched.

Egg-associated salmonella infections are a serious health problem. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention explains that persons infected with salmonella experience "fever, abdominal cramps, and diarrhea beginning 12 to 72 hours after consuming a contaminated food or beverage" (CDC, 2010). The illness typically lasts four to seven days. Antibiotic treatment is sometimes prescribed and in some cases, "the diarrhea can be severe, and the person may be ill enough to require hospitalization" (CDC, 2009). Like other food-borne illnesses, salmonella bacteria are most dangerous for the very young and the very old. The bacteria can be killed by thoroughly cooking or pasteurizing infected eggs. The eggs in the Viessman truck were raw and unpasteurized.

In 1994, Schwan's was a private company believed to be earning between $1.2 billion and $1.5 billion annually. Schwan's products were and still are shipped throughout the United States. As has been the case since the company began in 1952, Schwan's ice cream and other frozen foods are sold door-to-door by drivers in yellow, refrigerated trucks. Some of Schwan's products are also distributed to grocery stores throughout the country. Schwan's drivers tend to establish friendly relationships with their customers, because the drivers deliver products several times per month.

In the middle lane, Schwan's trucks are on their way to supply frozen food throughout the nation



Source: Photo Courtesy of the Schwan Food Company.

The popularity and broad distribution of Schwan's products meant that, in a short time, a wide network of customers had purchased infected ice cream. The subsequent outbreak was enormous. At least 224,000 people in 35 states became ill, making the Schwan's crisis the largest foodborne illness outbreak in history ("Ice Cream Poisoning," 1996).

A Guiding Philosophy

From Schwan's perspective, the crisis began on October 7, 1994. An epidemiologist from the Minnesota Department of Health contacted Schwan's, telling them that there was a "very, very big statistical relationship" between Schwan's ice cream and a widespread salmonella outbreak (Sievers & Yost, 1994, p. 1). Once this information was received, the company leaders met immediately to discuss their strategy. Schwan's had a crisis management plan in place, but the guiding philosophy for the company came from a statement made by company president Alfred Schwan. Schwan's manager of public affairs recalled that Schwan asked simply, "If you were a Schwan's customer, what would you expect the company to do?" (D. Jennings, personal communication, January 29, 1996). Jennings went on to say that this statement by Schwan's leader inspired the company to make the "right choices" throughout the crisis.

Schwan's Crisis Response

Schwan's did not hesitate to respond to the mounting evidence. Even before the final tests were processed, the company publicly announced that it was recalling the suspected ice cream. In the announcement, Schwan said, "The well-being of our customers is our very first priority at Schwan's, which is why we are willingly withdrawing our ice cream products from distribution and cooperating fully with government agencies" (Sievers & Yost, 1994, p. 1). Schwan's crisis response included apologies and refunds delivered by drivers, a consumer hotline, and compensation for medical treatment.

Schwan's had an advantage over most distributors in that the company's drivers had face-to-face contact with customers. Drivers apologized to customers, collected the recalled ice cream, and refunded them for the cost. Because the drivers had delivered the product, they were able to identify and contact a majority of the people who had purchased the tainted ice cream. Most food processing companies have no idea, beyond delivery to a grocery store or restaurant, who has purchased their products.

Schwan's managed the expansive nature of the outbreak by establishing a customer hotline. The company spared no expense with its hotline. Rather than using prerecorded messages, calls were answered in person. Jennings recalled that the hotline received "15,000 [calls] a day at its peak" (D. Jennings, personal communication, November 19, 1996). The hotline gave customers another means of speaking directly with the company to get answers to their questions.

A third strategy in Schwan's crisis response was to compensate customers for any medical expenses they may have incurred from eating the infected ice cream. The company mailed a letter to customers offering to pay for diagnostic medical exams. The crucial paragraph in the letter reads,

> If you believe you may have persisting symptoms of salmonella and have eaten any of our ice cream products mentioned, we want to encourage you to see your physician and get the tests necessary to confirm it one way or the other and get the treatment you need. The information on the reverse side of this letter will explain what the symptoms might include and how to go about getting the test. We will pay for the test. (D. Jennings, personal communication, October 14, 1996)

The letter clearly indicated that Schwan's valued the well-being of its customers over all other considerations. The letter, like all Schwan's correspondence with its customers, emphasized the guiding philosophy established by Alfred Schwan at the onset

of the crisis.

Learning From the Crisis

Schwan's immediate and thorough response to the crisis enabled the company to recover quickly without losing its customer base. Schwan's also used the crisis to learn how to make its products safer. In response to the salmonella outbreak, Schwan's made the following changes:

- Schwan's built a new facility allowing the company to re-pasteurize all products just before final packaging.
- Schwan's contracted to have a dedicated fleet of sealed tanker trucks to transport its products.

Although these changes were costly, Schwan's enacted them voluntarily. These changes established a new standard of safety in the food processing industry.

Summary

The Schwan's salmonella crisis is a classic case of effective crisis communication. It is interesting that the company based its response not on a long and detailed crisis plan but on a guiding philosophy. From this philosophy, Schwan's immediately took responsibility for the crisis and worked to repair relationships with its customers. Schwan's received a tremendous amount of support from its customers following the crisis for its response, even though many of its consumers became very ill as a result of the salmonella infection. Schwan's had several opportunities to shift the blame outside the organization. However, the company was determined to take care of its customers and move beyond the crisis.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time to determine whether Alfred Schwan and his company displayed effective leadership in managing the salmonella outbreak. First, take a moment to review the lessons for effective leadership in crisis situations described in Chapter 7. These lessons should guide you in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of Schwan's crisis response. As you contemplate the questions that follow, consider whether Schwan was effective or ineffective in addressing his customers' needs and concerns.

> Lessons on Developing Effective Leadership
>
> Lesson 1: Effective leadership is critical to overcoming a crisis.
> - In what ways was Schwan's leadership critical to overcoming the crisis?
>
> Lesson 2: Leaders should be visible during a crisis.
> - In what ways did Schwan's make itself visible following the crisis?
>
> Lesson 3: Leaders should work to develop a positive company reputation during normal times to build a reservoir of goodwill.
> - How did Schwan's develop a strong reputation prior to the crisis?
>
> Lesson 4: Leaders should be open and honest following a crisis.
> - In what ways was Schwan's open and honest following the crisis?
>
> Lesson 5: Leaders who manage crises successfully may create opportunities for renewal.
> - How did Schwan's create opportunities for renewal following the crisis?
>
> Lesson 6: Leaders should cooperate with stakeholders during a crisis and should work to build consensus.
> - Did Schwan's cooperate with stakeholders during and following the crisis?
>
> Lesson 7: Poor leadership, including denials, cover-ups, or lack of response, can make a crisis much worse.
> - Did Schwan's leadership make the crisis better or worse?
>
> Lesson 8: Leaders must adapt their leadership styles and contingencies during crises.
> - Did Schwan's leadership adapt its leadership style to the nature of the crisis?
>
> Lesson 9: A virtuous response to a crisis by the organization's leaders may be the most effective in generating support and renewal.
> - In what ways was the response by Schwan's virtuous?
>
> Lesson 10: Leaders have specific communication obligations for managing and learning from crises.
> - How did Schwan's manage the communication obligations following the crisis? Did learning take place?

Example 8.4. Freedom Industries and the West Virginia Drinking Water Contamination

A one-inch hole in an aging tank holding a chemical solution designed to clean coal created one of the worst drinking water crises in the history of the United States. This slight fissure in a large metal tank owned by Freedom Industries allowed 7,500 gallons of the chemical 4-methylcyclohexylmethanol (MCHM) to seep into the network of rivers that provided drinking water for 300,000 residents in the Charleston, West Virginia, area. Freedom Industries, located next to the Elk River, eventually noticed the leak and responded, but the damage was done. Complaints of a foul odor in the water had already been made by residents to the area's water treatment facility, the West Virginia American Water Company. Efforts to filter out the chemical by West Virginia American Water failed. On January 9, 2014, the treated water was determined unsafe, and a ban on drinking or bathing in the water was announced for the entire area.

A Delayed Response

Even after finding the breach in the tank, Freedom Industries did not alert West Virginia American Water Company or any other local government agency for several hours. This delay contributed to the related delay in issuing a ban on water use by West Virginia American Water Company. Freedom Industries did not attempt to cover up or deny that the spill had occurred. Rather, they remained publicly silent. Once the spill became public knowledge, the leadership at Freedom Industries avoided interviews from the media for more than a day. When Freedom Industries president, Gary Southern, did talk with the media late on the day after the spill was discovered, he explained that the leaking tank had been drained, the soil around the tank that was saturated with the chemical was removed, and there was no further danger. He did not issue a formal apology to residents, nor did he provide any steps toward corrective action beyond those described above.

Hundreds of complaints of rashes and other illnesses were reported, with several residents being hospitalized because of drinking or coming into contact with the contaminated drinking water. West Virginia's governor declared a state of emergency for the area, followed by President Obama declaring a federal state of emergency. Schools were closed as residents began drinking, bathing, and cooking exclusively with bottled water. Four days later, the ban was lifted for residents, with the exception of pregnant women. Residents were asked, however, to flush the pipes in their homes to rid them of residue from the contamination before returning to normal use of the water. Many residents were concerned about this announcement for several reasons. First, if the water was unsafe for pregnant women, how could it be safe for others? Second, many residents were unsure how to effectively flush their water pipes and how to know when the flushing was complete. Third, the delay in alerting residents caused some to lose confidence in West Virginia American Water and other agencies overseeing the spill recovery. Compounding the communication challenges was the fact that the government organizations, such as the CDC, EPA, FEMA, and the West Virginia American Water Company, were all involved in the crisis recovery process. Although their presence was helpful, these agencies failed to coordinate their communication into a consistent message (Getchell & Sellnow, 2016).

National Guard collecting water samples



Source: Cotton Puryear

Volunteer Voices

The gap between what residents felt they needed to know and the information they were given was filled, in large part, by volunteer voices. In her extensive study of the West Virginia Water case, Getchell (2016) observed the formation and regular communication of at least five volunteer groups whose mission focused on maximizing the safety of residents and helping them recover from the crisis. Each of these emergent organizations capitalized extensively on social media to connect with residents. The following is a summary of each organization Getchell discovered along with its function:

- West Virginia Clean Water Hub—This emergent organization appeared as a Facebook page one day after the crisis began. The site's creators offered to help coordinate the delivery of water to homes and to continue to coordinate recovery activities among citizens for what they suspected would be a lengthy period of time. The site also solicited donations of supplies and money to help citizens throughout the affected area.
- Dr. Walton and Engineering Graduate Students—Dr. Andrew Walton, a professor of engineering at the University of South Alabama at the time of the crisis, coordinated a team of civil engineering students who traveled to West Virginia as volunteers a week after the spill. The team collected water samples from homes, tested them, and shared their results with residents and with state officials. The team also offered advice to residents on how to thoroughly flush their pipes of the contaminated water. Dr. Walton remained active in the area throughout the recovery period.
- West Virginia Water Crisis Blog—Kristal Byron, a doctoral student at Ohio University, created a blog that invited residents to share their experiences and emotional reactions during the crisis. Byron, a former resident of West Virginia, recognized the emotional toll of the crisis for residents and the importance of expressing these emotions as part of the recovery process. She later traveled to the affected area, video recording residents as they told their stories. During the recovery phase of the crisis, Byron also posted notices of important events and opportunities available to residents.
- West Virginia Mom's for Safe Water—This organization operated through Facebook to connect with mothers who were seeking information to protect their children from the contaminated water. The site offered families a voice in demanding transparency, accountability, and corrective action from all agencies involved in providing safe water to the children of West Virginia.
- Easy Action of the Day for West Virginia—The group posted one action on Facebook that residents could do each day (requiring less than five minutes) to prevent such crises from happening again in the future. Examples of the suggested actions were sharing posts with others, signing petitions, and reaching out

to congressional representatives.

- Advocates for Safe Water—The group was related to the Easy Action of the Day for West Virginia group. Its focus, however, shifted to an emphasis on empowering citizens to take control of their public water by replacing the out-of-state agency currently operating the water treatment facility with a locally owned water municipality. West Virginia American Water is a subsidiary of American Water, which is headquartered in New Jersey.

The West Virginia Case clearly emphasizes the growing potential of social media to empower communities as they respond to and recover from crises. Residents who were frustrated with a lack of information from local government and the water company could seek out the volunteer voices described above to bridge the knowledge gap. New media also creates an opportunity for concerned citizens outside the affected area. In her study, Getchell (2016) noted that the virtual organizations described above enabled individuals far outside the region impacted by the crisis to become involved in the recovery through donations and by offering their expertise. She explains that social media has created opportunities for virtual crisis responders.

Summary

Freedom Industries' delayed and minimal response to the West Virginia water crisis heightened both uncertainty and danger for residents. West Virginia American Water responded in a timely manner, given the information they had. Unfortunately, the complexity of clearing such a pervasive contamination from an entire metropolitan area's drinking water supply created tremendous communication needs that many residents believed West Virginia American Water did not meet. The aid provided by volunteers outside the two companies helped to address the community's information needs. Additionally, this case vividly emphasizes the potential role of new media to assist communities in their crisis recovery.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time for you to determine if Freedom Industries and West Virginia American Water displayed effective leadership in managing the water crisis. First, take a moment to refresh in your mind the lessons established in Chapter 7 on effective crisis communication leadership. These lessons should guide you in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the communication by Freedom Industries and West Virginia American Water. As you contemplate the questions that follow, also consider whether emergent organizations started by volunteers were effective in leading West Virginia residents through the crisis.

Lessons on Developing Effective Leadership

Lesson 1: Effective leadership is critical to overcoming a crisis.

- In what ways was the leadership of Freedom Industries and West Virginia American Water critical to overcoming the crisis?
- In what ways was the leadership of the emergent organizations critical to overcoming the crisis?

Lesson 2: Leaders should be visible during a crisis.

- Were Freedom Industries and West Virginia American Water visible throughout the crisis?
- Were the emergent organizations visible throughout the crisis?

Lesson 3: Leaders should work to develop a positive company reputation during normal times to build a reservoir of goodwill.

- Was there evidence that Freedom Industries and West Virginia American Water had established a reservoir of goodwill with the community?
- To what extent were the emergent organizations able to establish goodwill with the community?

Lesson 4: Leaders should be open and honest following a crisis.

- Do you think Freedom Industries and West Virginia American Water were open and honest? Why or why not?
- Do you think the emergent organizations were open and honest? Why or why not?

Lesson 5: Leaders who manage crises successfully may create opportunities for renewal.

- How did Freedom Industries and West Virginia American Water create opportunities for renewal following the crisis? How were opportunities for renewal created or missed in the West Virginia water crisis?
- Did the emergent organizations create opportunities for renewal?

Lesson 6: Leaders should cooperate with stakeholders during a crisis and should work to build consensus.

- Was there consensus among stakeholders (including the public) on how to best clear the homes in the affected area of the chemical MCHM? Why or why not?

Lesson 7: Poor leadership, including denials, cover-ups, or lack of response, can make a crisis much worse.

- Was the leadership provided by Freedom Industries and West Virginia American Water good or bad? Why or why not?
- Was the leadership provided by the emergent organizations good or bad? Why or why not?

Lesson 8: Leaders must adapt their leadership styles and contingencies during crises.

- What were the leadership styles of Freedom Industries and West Virginia American Water during the crisis? Were these styles appropriate? Were they adapted?

Lesson 9: A virtuous response to a crisis by the organization's leaders may be the most effective in generating support and renewal.

- What leadership virtues did the leaders of Freedom Industries and West Virginia American Water demonstrate?
- What leadership virtues did the leaders of the emergent organizations demonstrate?

Lesson 10: Leaders have specific communication obligations for managing and learning from crises.

- To what extent do you believe the leaders of Freedom Industries and West Virginia American Water met their obligations? What lessons did they learn?
- To what extent did the emergent organizations recognize and address the obligations they believed were unmet in the community?

Example 8.5. United Airlines: Failed Crisis Leadership

United Airlines, Inc. is the world's third-largest airline by revenue. According to the company website, United operates the world's most comprehensive global route network that includes Asia, Australia, Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. The company reports that it employs over 88,400 employees in the United States (U.S.) and throughout the world.

United was founded in 1926 and operates out of its headquarters in Chicago, Illinois. In 2017, United's CEO Oscar Munoz was named U.S. Communicator of the Year by the magazine ("United Airlines CEO," 2017). His work in building consensus among various groups, including the company's various unions, was cited by *PRWeek* when it described him as an effective leader and communicator.

On April 9, 2017, a passenger was violently removed from an overbooked United flight. After failing to recruit volunteers by offering incentives for passengers to give up their seats and have their flights rescheduled, the United agents progressed to a lottery system. Several passengers were selected through the lottery to be rescheduled against their will, including Dr. David Dao. Dr. Dao refused to give up his seat, arguing that he had patients who needed to see him the following morning. Despite his argument for remaining on the plane, Dr. Dao, 69, was dragged from the plane after he refused to give up his seat to the United employees who needed to travel to other locations for other flights. Bumping of passengers is not an uncommon practice in the airline industry. The incident was recorded by other passengers and quickly went viral on social media.

Munoz's initial apology, posted on Twitter, was very limited.

> "This is an upsetting event to all of us here at United. I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers. Our team is moving with a sense of urgency to work with the authorities and conduct our own detailed review of what happened. We are also reaching out to this passenger to talk directly to him and further address and resolve this situation." (Munoz, 2017)

Later he expanded this explanation. When approached, the passenger "raised his voice and refused to comply with crew member instructions," Munoz said. He grew "more disruptive and belligerent" with each request, leaving agents with no choice but to call security officers. Munoz argued that the passenger continued to resist even after he was removed, running back into the plane. Other passengers shot video of him with blood streaming down his face, which were posted to various social media. Munoz went on further to explain that, "Our employees followed established procedures for

dealing with situations like this. While I deeply regret this situation arose, I also emphatically stand behind all of you, and I want to commend you for continuing to go above and beyond to ensure we fly right" (Munoz, 2017).

This initial response generated many criticisms. This was especially so given the vivid videos that showed Dr. Dao being dragged off the plane, blood streaming down his face, while other passengers pleaded with officials to stop. Munoz seemed to blame the passenger, suggesting the agents had no choice but to call security officers (Munoz, 2017).

Within a day, the inadequacy of the company response was clear. Consumer boycotts and calls from lawmakers put the company and its CEO on the defensive. Four senior senators from the Senate Commerce Committee released a letter to Munoz noting, "The last thing a paying airline passenger should expect is a physical altercation with law enforcement personnel after boarding, especially one that could likely have been avoided." Customers posted videos showing them cutting up their United credit cards. Munoz acknowledges that "No one should ever be mistreated this way" (Munoz, 2017).

Investors and stockholders immediately took notice and sold off shares of United Continental Holdings. The stock fell 3.4% in four days, wiping out nearly $1 billion in value. The United episode generated several social media memes including a United flight attendant offering "Coffee, tea or a savage beating?" and "United: If we need the seating, you will get a beating." Many of these memes referenced United Airlines motto "Fly the friendly skies."

The company initially faced a high-profile lawsuit by Dr. Dao and more negative publicity. Lawsuits keep negative stories alive in the minds of the public and distract top management from running the company. United settled the case quickly for an undisclosed amount. Settling lawsuits following a crisis is often used as a strategy to get the story out of the news as quickly as possible.

On April 27, United announced ten sweeping changes it described as "efforts to improve the customer experience" (United Airlines, 2017). These include the following:

1. Limit use of law enforcement to safety and security issues only.
2. Not require customers seated on the plane to give up their seat involuntarily unless safety or security is at risk.
3. Increase customer compensation incentives for voluntary denied boarding up to $10,000.
4. Establish a customer solutions team to provide agents with creative solutions such as using nearby airports, other airlines, or ground transportations to get customers to their final destination.
5. Ensure crews are booked onto a flight at least 60 minutes prior to departure.

6. Provide employees with additional annual training.
7. Create an automated system for soliciting volunteers to change travel plans.
8. Reduce the amount of overbooking.
9. Empower employees to resolve customer service issues in the moment.
10. Eliminate the red tape on permanently lost bags by adopting a "no questions asked" policy on lost luggage.

Several of these changes were a direct result of the incident with Dr. Dao, and many other airlines began to follow suit with similar changes. These changes were accompanied by an e-mail letter from CEO Munoz that stated in part,

> Dear Customer,
>
> Each flight you take with us represents an important promise we make to you, our customer. It's not simply that we make sure you reach your destination safely and on time, but also that you will be treated with the highest level of service and the deepest sense of dignity and respect.
>
> Earlier this month, we broke that trust when a passenger was forcibly removed from one of our planes. We can never say we are sorry enough for what occurred, but we also know meaningful actions will speak louder than words.
>
> For the past several weeks, we have been urgently working to answer two questions: How did this happen, and how can we do our best to ensure this never happens again?

Protesters following the United Airlines crisis



Source: JOSHUA LOTT/AFP/Getty Images

It happened because our corporate policies were placed ahead of our shared values. Our procedures got in the way of our employees doing what they know is right.

Fixing that problem starts now with changing how we fly, serve and respect our customers. This is a turning point for all of us here at United—and as CEO, it's my responsibility to make sure that we learn from this experience and redouble our efforts to put our customers at the center of everything we do. (Munoz, 2017)

Summary

Whether he was misinterpreted or insensitive, Munoz's initial response to the crisis exacerbated the public outrage felt toward United Airlines. Given the fact that the crisis already had a huge Internet audience, this initial communication failure allowed the crisis to become an even bigger story. Munoz later provided a response that addressed the true nature of the problem. Still, his sincerity had already been tarnished.

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time to determine how leadership worked in the United Airlines case. First, take a moment to review the lessons for effective leadership in crisis situations described in Chapter 7. These lessons should guide you in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the crisis responses.

Lessons on Developing Effective Leadership

Lesson 1: Effective leadership is critical to overcoming a crisis.

- How did leadership function in this case?

Lesson 2: Leaders should be visible during a crisis.

- Describe how the CEO responded early on.
- Did the CEO's communication change as the crisis progressed?

Lesson 3: Leaders should work to develop a positive reputation during normal times to build a reservoir of goodwill.

- Do airlines have positive reputations? Are they known for good customer service? How did this impact United?

Lesson 4: Leaders should be open and honest following a crisis.

- Do you think the CEO was open and honest?

Lesson 5: Leaders who manage crises successfully may create opportunities for renewal.

- Were there opportunities for renewal missed during this crisis? If so, what were they?

Lesson 6: Leaders should cooperate with stakeholders during a crisis and should work to build consensus.

- How did United communicate with stakeholders?

Lesson 7: Poor leadership, including denials, cover-ups, or lack of response, can make a crisis much worse.

- Describe specific ways in which the leadership or the CEO was inadequate.

Lesson 8: Leaders must adapt their leadership styles and contingencies during crises.

- Describe the ways in which the CEO changed his message.

Lesson 9: A virtuous response to a crisis by the organization's leaders may be the most effective in generating support and renewal.

- What leadership virtues did the CEO demonstrate?
- Were any responses lacking virtue?

Lesson 10: Leaders have specific communication obligations for managing and learning from crises.

- What were the communication obligations in this case? Did the CEO effectively meet those obligations?
- What communication obligations were missing from this case?

Example 8.6. SeaWorld's Orca: A Symbol of Tragedy

The distressing day in 2010 began like any other for Dawn Brancheau, an experienced trainer at SeaWorld Orlando. With an audience of guests looking on, Brancheau petted the giant orca whale Tilikum on the nose and turned to face the crowd. Without warning, Tilikum grabbed Brancheau's long ponytail with his mouth, jerking her into the pool. The whale then thrashed her about violently. Coworkers dismissed the crowd and tried in vain to rescue Brancheau. An autopsy revealed that Brancheau suffered fatal blunt force trauma to her head, neck, and torso while drowning (Mooney, 2010). Brancheau's tragic death initiated a crisis that would, for more than half a decade, steadily expand to the point of threatening the entire SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment organization's financial stability. The organization has parks similar to the one in Orlando, Florida, located in San Diego, California, and San Antonio, Texas.

Inevitable Questions

The death of Dawn Brancheau was heartbreaking. Her competence and innocence as a trainer made Tilikum's attack hard to comprehend. As expected, media coverage and public outcry were intense in the days following the tragedy. SeaWorld Orlando could not ignore the questions raised in this broad public reaction. Tim Desmond, former president of the International Marine Animal Trainers Association, summarized this reaction in the days after the attack: "Are these shows necessary? Did animal cruelty trigger the attack? Should trainers work with orcas in this way?" (Desmond, 2010, para. 1). The incident also triggered an angry response from animal rights activists who proclaimed: "The attack proves that this animal led a tortured life in captivity!" "Free Tilikum!" "Close the zoos! They're just in it for the money!" (Desmond, 2010, para. 2).

Shamu and trainer Dawn Brancheau



Source: Ed Schipul, https://www.flickr.com/photos/eschipul/265745811/, Licensed under CC-BY-2.0, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0.

Simply portraying the death of Brancheau as a very freak accident was not seen as a sufficient response. Prior to Brancheau's death, Tilikum was connected with the deaths of two other people. No clear evidence showed Tilikum killing the two individuals, but he was present in both deaths. Captured off the coast of Iceland, Tilikum's first park home was Sealand of the Pacific in British Columbia, Canada. In 1991, a part-time trainer at Sealand of the Pacific drowned after slipping and falling into a pool with three orcas, one of which was Tilikum (Hoyt, 1992). Tilikum was then sold

to SeaWorld Orlando. In 1999, a man snuck into SeaWorld Orlando after hours and his dead body was later found draped over Tilikum's back (Hauser, 2017).

Blackfish: A Condemning Documentary

In 2013, a documentary film entitled *Blackfish* was shown at the Sundance Film Festival and later broadly distributed by Magnolia Pictures and CNN Films. The one hour twenty three minute documentary focused on the death of Dawn Brancheau, Tilikum's capture in the wild, the whale's troubled past, and speculation that whales held in captivity experience extreme stress. The film earned more than two million dollars at the box office (Blackfish, n.d.). The emotionally stirring documentary portrayed SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment as irresponsibly profiting from the capture of whales, mistreating them in captivity, and caring little about the safety of its trainers. The documentary added severely to the public backlash SeaWorld Orlando was already facing.

SeaWorld's Response

SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment responded to the documentary with its "SeaWorld Cares" campaign. A section of the website for the campaign seeks to counter the claims made in *Blackfish*. SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment argues the following:

1. Blackfish employs false and emotionally manipulative sequences concerning the collection and separation of killer whales.
2. The film relies on former SeaWorld employees, most of whom have little experience with killer whales, and others who haven't worked at SeaWorld in nearly 20 years.
3. The film also relies on animal rights activists masquerading as scientists.
4. The film spins an entirely fictitious account of Dawn Brancheau's death in order to advance its anti-captivity narrative.
5. To advance both its anti-captivity narrative and its false theories surrounding Ms. Brancheau's death, the film falsely suggests that Tilikum had become psychotic and aggressive.
6. The film falsely suggests that important facts about Tilikum were concealed from his trainers and that SeaWorld is indifferent to trainer safety. ("Why 'Blackfish,'" n.d.)

SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment spent millions of dollars in an ad campaign to promote its message. SeaWorld's ultimate argument is that *Blackfish* should be seen as propaganda rather than as a documentary. In addition to refuting the *Blackfish* accusation, the SeaWorld Cares campaign also emphasizes SeaWorld's long-standing efforts to promote conservation and research. SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment's leadership also pledged to address concerns about the orca whales' captive habitat by spending millions of dollars at its facilities to expand the size of their pools.

Despite the SeaWorld Cares campaign, the SeaWorld franchise has steadily declined in profit and attendance since the death of Dawn Brancheau and the release of *Blackfish* ("SeaWorld," 2017). As a result, SeaWorld has now stopped breeding orcas in captivity and is in the process of phasing out its former signature attraction—killer whale performances. The last killer whale to ever be born in a SeaWorld facility arrived in April of 2017 ("It's an Orca," 2017). After a prolonged bacterial infection, Tilikum died at SeaWorld Orlando, in January of 2017. The whale had long-suffered from a bacterial infection (Hauser, 2017).

Summary

SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment's crisis began with a human tragedy and expanded to include a full-blown debate about the ethical treatment of animals in captivity. SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment's leadership sincerely felt their organization was mistreated in the *Blackfish* documentary. The success of efforts to reduce the damage done by the documentary have been mixed at best. The long-term future of SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment remains a work in progress. The dramatic changes introduced by the organization have diminished criticism, but the question remains, will attendance return to its former level?

You Make the Call

After examining this case, it is time for you to determine if SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment displayed effective leadership in managing the crisis. First, take a moment to refresh in your mind the lessons established in Chapter 7 for effective leadership during crises. These lessons should guide you in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the leadership response by SeaWorld.

Lessons on Developing Effective Leadership

Lesson 1: Effective leadership is critical to overcoming a crisis.

- In what ways was the leadership of SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment critical to overcoming the crisis?

Lesson 2: Leaders should be visible during a crisis.

- Was the leadership of SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment visible during the crisis?

Lesson 3: Leaders should work to develop a positive company reputation during normal times to build a reservoir of goodwill.

- Was there evidence that SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment had established a reservoir of goodwill with the community?

Lesson 4: Leaders should be open and honest following a crisis.

- Do you think SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment was open and honest? Why or why not?

Lesson 5: Leaders who manage crises successfully may create opportunities for renewal.

- How were opportunities for renewal created or missed by SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment?

Lesson 6: Leaders should cooperate with stakeholders during a crisis and should work to build consensus.

- Was there evidence that SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment responded to its stakeholders in developing its crisis response?

Lesson 7: Poor leadership, including denials, cover-ups, or lack of response, can make a crisis much worse.

- Was the leadership provided by SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment good or bad? Why or why not?

Lesson 8: Leaders must adapt their leadership styles and contingencies during crises.

- Did SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment's leadership adapt during the crisis?

Lesson 9: A virtuous response to a crisis by the organization's leaders may be the most effective in generating support and renewal.

- What leadership virtues did the leaders of SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment demonstrate?

Lesson 10: Leaders have specific communication obligations for managing and learning from crises.

- To what extent do you believe the leaders of SeaWorld Parks & Enter-

tainment met their obligations? What lessons did they learn?

Part III The Opportunities

Chapter 9: Learning Through Failure
Chapter 10: Risk Communication
Chapter 11: Responding to the Ethical Demands of Crisis
Chapter 12: Facilitating Renewal Through Effective Crisis Communication

9 Learning Through Failure

A capacity crowd composed of tourists, space enthusiasts, students, and the astronauts' family members gathered at NASA's Kennedy Space Center on February 1, 2003, anxious to observe the shuttle *Columbia*'s triumphant return from space. When the shuttle failed to appear, the crowd's emotions moved from confusion to alarm as a loudspeaker announced that there had been a major malfunction. The malfunction was a full-blown crisis. As *Columbia* moved through Earth's atmosphere, the spacecraft shattered, strewing debris for miles near Nacogdoches, Texas.

How could such a disaster have happened?

Seventeen years earlier, the shuttle *Challenger* exploded as it was launched, killing all aboard. After the *Challenger* explosion, all future shuttle launches were halted, as the Reagan administration called for a thorough examination of the NASA program. Dramatic changes in leadership, shuttle structure, and communication procedures were enacted to remedy problems found during the *Challenger* investigation. Yet a review of the *Columbia* disaster reveals that many of the flaws in NASA's organizational culture that led to the *Challenger* disaster reemerged in the *Columbia* crisis. Why, with so much to lose, would an organization fail to learn from one crisis, only to create a similar event a decade and a half later?

Phillip Tompkins (2005) summarizes his extensive study of NASA in his book *Apollo, Challenger, Columbia: The Decline of the Space Program*. Tompkins describes a cautious and responsive organizational culture that had declined as the space shuttle program replaced the Apollo missions. A culture emerged that was less sensitive to safety and much more concerned with bureaucratic procedures and financial matters. Tompkins describes the impact of this changing culture:

> We saw that a culture can divide into two antagonistic cultures, two warring tribes with a cultural fence between them: in this case the managerial/bureaucratic subculture and the weakened engineering/concertive one. We watched a reversal of status, as the engineers became second-class members, forced to communicate through the formal channels, intimidated by the managers. The informal system of communication could no longer save the formal system. (p. 203)

The bitterest element of the *Columbia* disaster is the fact that the presence of this perilous culture was identified following the *Challenger* tragedy.

In this chapter, we identify several opportunities organizations have to learn from

crises. We begin with an exploration of why some organizations fail to learn from them. We continue with a discussion of the process for learning through failure, the possibility for vicarious learning, the necessity of organizational memory, and the need for organizations to unlearn some unproductive habits.

Failing to Learn From Failure

Simply experiencing a negative event is not sufficient for learning. Think of the stories you may have heard about individuals who have acquired multiple citations and license suspensions for driving while intoxicated. The event alone is not enough to change behavior. Behavior can only change when an individual chooses to learn from an event. This learning requires individuals to change their beliefs and attitudes so that, in turn, their behaviors are altered.

From an organizational perspective, learning can be a complicated process. The acquisition of knowledge and the shifts in behavior must occur at all levels in what can be a highly complex system. Bazerman and Watkins (2004) contend that, when organizations fail to learn from failures, they become vulnerable to predictable surprises. Bazerman and Watkins distinguish *predictable surprises* from *unpredictable surprises*. Predictable surprises occur when an organization's leadership ignores or fails to understand clear evidence that a potentially devastating problem could occur. Unpredictable surprises occur with no clear warning signs.

Bazerman and Watkins (2004) identify four ways in which organizations fail to learn from the failures that occur around them:

1. *Scanning failures:* failure to pay close attention to potential problems both inside and outside the organization; this failure could be due to arrogance, a lack of resources, or simple inattention
2. *Integration failures:* failure to understand how pieces of potentially complicated information fit together to provide lessons on how to avoid crises
3. *Incentive failures:* failure to provide sufficient rewards to people who report problems and take actions to avoid possible crises
4. *Learning failures:* failure to draw important lessons from crises and preserve their memories in the organization

Organizational leaders who experience one or more of these failures jeopardize the future safety of their organizations.

Mitroff and Anagnos (2001), in their book *Managing Crises Before They Happen: What Every Executive and Manager Needs to Know About Crisis Management*, provide a convincing example of how an organization can fail to learn from a previous crisis. In 1982, Johnson & Johnson responded to a link between Tylenol capsules and several deaths because of cyanide poisoning by pulling the product from the shelves and communicating candidly with the media. Investigators later determined that the product had been tampered with while on a store shelf. During the investigation, both the FBI and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advised against pulling the product.

Nevertheless, Johnson & Johnson recalled 31 million bottles of Tylenol. Although the short-term losses for Tylenol were staggering, the product reemerged as a top seller. When a second Tylenol poisoning event occurred, Johnson & Johnson's response was equally effective. Its swift and forthright response to the crises established a standard for all organizations facing crises. Mitroff and Anagnos explain, however, that much of Johnson & Johnson's success was based on the fact that, even though the company was not to blame for the crisis, Johnson & Johnson responded without hesitation in the hope that no more consumers would be injured or killed.

Mitroff and Anagnos (2001) assert that, in recent years, Johnson & Johnson has been far less effective in its crisis management. In the past decade, Johnson & Johnson has faced several crises resulting from predictable surprises. The company's products have been linked to overdose problems in children. Tylenol has also been associated with liver damage. In these cases, Mitroff and Anagnos found that Johnson & Johnson's response has been comparatively slow and much less effective. Mitroff and Anagnos explain that "ironically, because J & J did so well in handling its two major crises, it did not learn the proper lessons" (p. 19).

Using Bazerman and Watkins's (2004) foregoing list of failures, we can speculate about Johnson & Johnson's failure to learn. Because the Tylenol poisonings were caused by a criminal, they were unpredictable surprises. The poisonings offered no incentive for scanning the environment for potential product failures. Second, the criminal cases did not provide an obvious link to other types of failures. Thus, little integration of information was inspired by them. Third, the Tylenol poisonings clearly revealed incentives for responding immediately to a criminal assault on a product. Yet the events gave little incentive to Johnson & Johnson employees for closely monitoring and reporting potential failures related to the daily consumption of its products. Last, Johnson & Johnson experienced a learning failure when it did not draw lessons from the crises that reached beyond the criminal level.

Mitroff and Anagnos (2001) characterize the dwindling effectiveness of Johnson & Johnson in its crisis management as a "failure of success" (p. 20). The company was so successful in its initial Tylenol crises that it failed to respond effectively when faced with a crisis of a different type.

Learning Through Failure

Most of us can think of a sport, a school subject, or a project of some sort where we learned from our mistakes. Our failures help us better understand what we need to do if we want to improve. We learn from the mistakes or near misses that occur in the world around us. We may not even be aware of a risk until some crisis or near crisis occurs. For example, several teens were recently exploring an unsupervised cave near the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The cave was a popular summer spot for adolescents in the area. On this occasion, however, something went terribly wrong. As many had done numerous times in the past, four teens entered the cave anticipating a daring adventure. This excursion, however, ended tragically, with three of the teens dying from asphyxiation because of the poor air quality in the cave. The fourth struggled against losing consciousness and eventually crawled from the cave. The story raised community awareness of the cave's danger. Parents in the area, who previously either overlooked or were unaware of the cave, monitored the progress of authorities as they attempt to seal the cave and to patrol the area. The community learned a painful lesson about such caves. The media carried the story throughout the state and region, thereby spreading the lesson to authorities, parents, and teens who would not have otherwise been aware of the danger.

Organizational learning can function in much the same way. Sitkin (1996) details the way organizations of all kinds may learn through failure, going so far as to argue that failure is an essential part of the learning process. He insists that failures, especially minor ones, should not be overlooked or concealed. Mittelstaedt (2005) agrees. In his extensive study of organizational crises, Mittelstaedt makes the seemingly paradoxical observation that making mistakes is essential to success. A company that appears to operate free from disruption may simply be operating from an unrealistic and uninformed perspective. Mittelstaedt contends that "learning to identify mistakes in an analytic and timely fashion is often the difference between success and failure" (p. 287).

Sitkin (1996) extends this claim: Too often, he explains, employees and managers are unwilling to admit small failures for fear of reprisal from organizational leadership. The unwillingness to recognize and embrace failure is also a failure to recognize and respond to a potential crisis. The longer a failure is allowed to continue, the more likely it will intensify into a full-blown crisis. Sitkin explains further that, in successful organizations, failure creates a recognition of risk and a motivation for change that otherwise would not exist. He describes this recognition as a "learning readiness" (p. 548) that, without failure, is very difficult to produce in most organizations. Sitkin cautions, however, that not all failures are equally effective in fostering good risk management. He claims that organizations learn best from *intelligent failures*, which have the following five characteristics: They (1) result from thoughtfully planned actions, (2) have uncertain outcomes, (3) are modest in scale, (4) are executed and responded

to with alacrity (eagerness), and (5) take place in domains that are familiar enough to permit effective learning.

In summary, organizations learn to recognize risk by accepting and acting on their failures. They learn best when the failures result from competent actions, are not yet crises, and are within the comfort zones of employees who are eager and experienced enough to respond wisely and quickly. Learning from failure leads to Opportunity 1.

> Opportunity 1
>
> Organizations should treat failure as an opportunity to recognize a potential crisis or to prevent a similar crisis in the future.

Vicarious Learning

Organizations do not necessarily need to fail themselves in order to learn. Successful organizations engage in *vicarious learning* in order to recognize risk, wherein organizational leaders observe the failures or crises experienced by similar organizations and take action to avoid making the same mistakes. A few examples will emphasize the value of vicarious learning. When a perpetrator mailed a letter claiming that he or she had infected cattle in New Zealand with foot and mouth disease (FMD), the country's agricultural ministry was faced with one of the world's greatest fears. Biological terrorism—or bioterror—on the world's food supply has long been a worrisome prospect for world leaders. New Zealand's government was worried that its worst fears had been realized. If FMD spread, its cattle industry would be decimated. The country responded swiftly to calm its citizens and to avoid losing the confidence of consumers worldwide. Eventually, the letter was proved to be a hoax. The disruption New Zealand faced prompted bioterror experts in other countries, such as the United States, to fortify their plans for managing false claims of terrorist activity. By so doing, many countries learned from New Zealand's successful response.

When college students organized a boycott of all Nike products in response to accusations of worker abuse in its shoe factories in Vietnam, Nike initially failed to react. When the boycott rapidly spread to additional universities and Nike sales figures began to decline, the company responded dramatically. Admitting that he should have responded sooner, Nike's chief operating officer announced that the company was setting a new standard for worker safety and safety inspections in its Asian factories. Nike also raised the minimum working age and provided educational opportunities for workers. To avoid parallel boycotts, companies such as Adidas and Reebok began implementing similar standards.

Both the New Zealand and Nike examples offer evidence that organizations can learn and learn well without experiencing a crisis or failure within their corporate boundaries by monitoring other members of their industries. This demonstrates Opportunity 2.

> Opportunity 2
>
> Organizations can avoid crises by learning from other organizations' failures and crises.

Organizational Memory

Without learning from their own and others' mistakes, organizations stagnate and fail to respond to potential threats in an ever-changing world. Yet, as any student of any subject knows, learning is of little use if the knowledge is not retained. In organizations, this retention of knowledge is referred to as *organizational memory*. From the perspective of crisis communication, organizational memory consists of an accumulation of knowledge based on the observation of successes and failures, both within the company and through vicarious observation. If an organization's members do not remember and act on their knowledge of previous failures, a crisis is much more likely to occur.

A horrific example of a failure in organizational memory occurred at a Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, in 1984. Early on a December morning, the plant leaked a deadly cloud of gas that settled over part of the sleeping city of 900,000. Within hours, 2,000 residents were dead and thousands more were injured.

How could such a crisis occur? Union Carbide was a reputable company. The plant had many safety procedures in place to detect and prevent such leaks. Part of the answer is in a loss of organizational memory. The plant had been slated for closure. Many of the experienced staff had already been transferred to other locations, leaving a minimal crew with little experience. The training program for the workers who remained had been reduced to the minimum. The crisis was eventually traced to staff reductions and oversight failures. Much of the blame for the tragedy rests with a rapid reduction in experienced staff that took with them a large share of the organization's memory.

Bhopal represents one of the most dismal failures in organizational memory to occur in the past century and offers compelling motivation for understanding how to maintain it. In the most general sense, organizational memory consists of the following three stages:

1. *Acquiring knowledge*, as we discussed earlier, is achieved by recognizing failures within the organization and by observing the failures of similar organizations.
2. *Distributing knowledge* is the key to organizational memory. Inevitably, highly experienced employees will leave the organization. Unless these people are given an opportunity to share their knowledge with other employees, the knowledge will leave the organization along with the departing personnel. Thus, the organization is doomed to repeat previous failures.
3. *Acting on knowledge* is essential for organizational memory to serve an organization. If new employees are unwilling to learn from departing ones, the organization's accumulated knowledge is lost. Thus, new employees who want to do

things their way could be destined to repeat previous organizational failures.

As the three steps to organizational memory show, employees have many opportunities to disregard hard-earned knowledge.

Organizations can take steps to minimize the likelihood that employees will disregard new knowledge. Novak and Sellnow (2009) offer several suggestions for engaging the workforce in positive change that reduces risk. Access to information is essential. They explain that "information flow and risk discourse occur more readily when employees regularly engage in discourse about operations" (p. 367). This discourse emphasizes the lessons learned onsite or vicariously. Novak and Sellnow explain that when employees "are talking, hearing, and doing training throughout the day and every day, the collective mindfulness of the organizations increases" (p. 367). In this manner, employees are able to consistently retain and act on new information.

Because organizational memory depends on the exchange of information from one person to another, the process will always be imperfect. Rivalry among employees, perceived mistreatment of employees by the organization, or a simple unwillingness by new employees or organizational leaders to learn from their predecessors all disrupt the preservation of organizational memory. Mittelstaedt (2005) offers this blunt assessment: "Not only must we continue to learn, but until we develop 'plug-compatible' brain dumps, each new generation must start learning from scratch but at a higher level" (pp. 120–121). This higher level involves learning and retaining what we can from previous experience while embracing the learning process.

The enormous impact of organizational memory on the crisis prevention process leads us to Opportunity 3.

> Opportunity 3
>
> Organizational training and planning should emphasize the preservation of previous learning in order to make organizational memory a priority.

Unlearning

To this point, we have seen the importance of organizational learning and organizational memory. On occasion, however, effective organizational learning depends on an organization's ability to unlearn practices and policies that have become outdated because of environmental changes.

A ruinous flood that occurred along the North Dakota and Minnesota border provides a compelling example of the need for unlearning. For decades prior to the massive 1997 flood, the communities had focused their flood-fighting energy on the construction of mammoth dikes. Flooding had become a normal occurrence in the expansive valley. The dikes gave residents confidence that, each spring, the waters could be held back from the cities and homes in the region. As time went on, the dikes were recognized more for the green space they made available for hiking and winter sledding. After 1997, however, this flood-fighting philosophy had to be unlearned. The 1997 flood revealed that some neighborhoods were simply too close to the river and at too low an elevation to be protected by dikes. Homeowners who had lived in their houses for 40 or more years were asked to accept government buyouts and move to safer ground. The magnitude of this flood brought the realization that simply adding dikes was a losing proposition. Accordingly, the community leaders were inspired to unlearn their previous dike-building policy for lowland areas. In its place, they adopted a policy that required residents to move to locations where they could be better defended against future floods.

Changes like those adopted after the Red River Valley floods do not come easily to organizations. Employees, management, and other stakeholders become comfortable with the way things are done. This comfort, however, can blind organizations to the urgency of an impending crisis. As Huber (1996) explains, unlearning is much more than simply discarding knowledge. Unlearning occurs when organizations recognize that existing procedures constrain the organization's ability to respond to crises. From this perspective, three results may occur from unlearning:

1. *Expanding options:* When organizations are unwilling to forgo routine procedures during crisis or potential crisis situations, they lose the capacity to react to unique circumstances. Unlearning enables the organization to expand its options.
2. *Contracting options:* In some cases, organizations may respond to a crisis with a strategy that has worked well in the past. In the current situation, however, the strategy from the past may actually make matters worse. In such cases, organizations must be willing to reject some strategies in favor of others.
3. *Grafting:* In the previous section, we discussed the need for organizations to hand down existing knowledge to new employees. If the socialization of new

> employees is so intense that they cannot bring new knowledge to the organization, however, the organization is doing itself a disservice. Although organizational memory is essential, some degree of unlearning in favor of the ideas new employees bring may be helpful in predicting and responding to crises.

Although we may seem to be contradicting ourselves by extolling the benefits of unlearning in organizational crisis communication, we are convinced that unlearning can be a necessary step in the learning process and thus in the crisis management process.

Unlearning, then, can be an essential ingredient. Thus, we offer Opportunity 4.

> Opportunity 4
>
> Organizations must be willing to unlearn outdated or ineffective procedures if they are to learn better crisis management strategies.

Summary

Conventional wisdom suggests that failures are negative events that should be avoided at all costs. This chapter makes the opposite argument. From the perspective of organizational learning, failing and responding to failure are essential steps in both crisis prevention and crisis management. Effective organizations learn directly from their own failures and vicariously from the failures of similar organizations. The knowledge thus acquired produces organizational memory. If organizations are able to preserve this memory, they have a better repertoire for managing or avoiding crises. Although organizational memory is an essential component of crisis prevention and management, there are times when unlearning is needed. If routine procedures fail, organizations must abandon some strategies and seek out others. One means of developing new strategies is to hire new employees who can bring fresh ideas. If organizations are willing to devote themselves to effective organizational learning, they may experience the following four opportunities:

> Opportunity 1: Organizations should treat failure as an opportunity to recognize a potential crisis or to prevent a similar crisis in the future.
>
> Opportunity 2: Organizations can avoid crises by learning from other organizations' failures and crises.
>
> Opportunity 3: Organizational training and planning should emphasize the preservation of previous learning in order to make organizational memory a priority.
>
> Opportunity 4: Organizations must be willing to unlearn outdated or ineffective procedures if they are to learn better crisis management strategies.

10 Risk Communication

In the United States, genetically altered corn, soybeans, and cotton are grown and consumed broadly. The techniques used in developing these products of modern technology are similar to those used in traditional plant breeding methods. In this case, however, the technology involves actually identifying and transferring selected genes into plants. As a result, some crops are now grown in the United States using considerably less water, pesticides, herbicides, and cultivation than in the past. Despite these advantages, many European countries, such as the United Kingdom and France, reject this technology. They label foods grown from seeds produced through biotechnology "Franken foods" and restrict the importation of many products produced with ingredients from these crops. Policy makers from countries in Southeast Asia have similar reservations to those expressed in Europe. Despite the fact that plant and food scientists in countries such as China, Vietnam, and Indonesia have endorsed biotechnology, the governments of these countries refuse to allow the production of crops using biotechnology. Moreover, many citizens in these countries fear the introduction of products of biotechnology. Although the crops have been consumed in many countries for more than a decade without creating health problems, rumors that these foods cause cancer, autism, or environmental destruction still prevail. The controversy over biotechnology is, to a large extent, a matter of risk communication.

Those who deem biotechnology safe see the technology as a means for addressing a looming risk—a rising world population and a shrinking amount of land available for growing food. For example, the Population Institute (n.d.) projects that the world's population will "increase from 6.8 billion to 8.3 billion" with an increasing demand for meat and dairy products (p. 2). As a result, the institute acknowledges predictions that "by 2030 the world will need to produce around 50 percent more food and energy, together with 30 per cent [*sic*] more fresh water, whilst mitigating and adapting to climate change" (p. 2). In response to these demands, the International Food Information Council (2003) explains that "with land availability being constant and the population continuing to grow, food biotechnology offers the potential to produce more food and feed more people using less land than previously possible" (p. 15).

Which side is correct about biotechnology and the world's food supply? Is biotechnology the answer to feeding the world or is it a gateway to disease and environmental destruction? Risk communication is the means by which we answer such questions. Because no crisis has occurred, the debate centers on perceived levels of uncertainty. Neither side on the biotechnology debate can say with certainty that harm is inevitable or that no harm will ever come from these products of modern technology. Those who advocate biotechnology believe sufficient research is available to establish their safety. Those who oppose biotechnology are not yet convinced that sufficient research exists.

In this chapter, we characterize the nature of risk communication. If we had all the answers regarding biotechnology, risk communication would be unnecessary.

Distinguishing Between Risk and Crisis

In a landmark publication, the National Research Council (NRC) (1989) defines *risk communication* as "an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions" (p. 2). *Interactive* is the key word. The NRC advocates that risk communication be an interactive dialogue among those who are facing risk and those who have some capacity for controlling or reducing that risk. For example, according to this definition, when a factory is built, the organization that built it is responsible for interacting with area residents to help them understand any potential risks that may be caused by the factory and its emissions into the air and water. If an organization simply announces to area residents that its new factory is *safe*, the organization has not met the interactive expectation established by the NRC. Instead, the organization should share the information residents need to determine the risks and economic benefits of the new factory. Through this interaction, residents can better determine whether they (a) perceive a risk or (b) are willing to tolerate the risks because the potential benefits outweigh them.

The interaction process with risk communication differs considerably from crisis communication, yet poor risk communication can, itself, produce crises. For example, residents at Disney resorts in Florida were warned to stay out of the water in lagoons on resort property. When a toddler splashing in a resort lagoon was suddenly and shocking bitten, pulled into the water, and drowned by an alligator in 2016, many questioned whether the risk communication was sufficient. In response, Disney added dramatic signs near all lagoons and streams on its property, specifically identifying alligators and snakes as a prevalent risk. The signs constantly remind guests that the natural bodies of water in Florida are potentially dangerous. These signs are described in Chapter 2 as an example of exemplification.

Reynolds and Seeger (2005) offer a clear distinction between risk and crisis communication. Table 10.1 provides a list of eight clear differences between risk and crisis communication. We summarize these distinctions as well:

- Risk communication is future oriented, because risk focuses on what may happen. In contrast, crisis, by its nature, is focused on a specific event that is occurring or has already occurred.
- Risk communication is designed to avert a crisis, while crisis communication seeks to explain the consequences for a regrettable event.
- Risk messages are designed to speculate about what might happen, based on current knowledge. Crisis messages typically focus on a known event and speculate about how and why the event happened.
- Risk messages are designed for long-term planning. Crisis messages focus on the short term, as they seek to address an immediate problem.

- Risk messages typically come from technical experts and scientists who use their expertise to foresee potential problems. Once a crisis has occurred, most communication comes from authoritative figures, such as government officials, who are charged with maintaining or reestablishing order.
- Risk messages tend to have a personal focus, because as the NRC advocates, they should be interactive, so that individuals can decide for themselves whether or not they believe a risk is tolerable. In contrast, crisis messages address the entire community affected by a crisis.
- Risk communication has the luxury of time. Full-blown media campaigns, such as appeals for using seat belts, can be designed and implemented over an extended period of time. Crisis messages typically take the form of news conferences, press releases, speeches, and any other available means that can get the information out as quickly as possible.
- Risk messages can be carefully crafted and controlled. Crisis messages must be developed spontaneously in reaction to the crisis.

As you can see, risk and crisis communication differ dramatically. They are inextricably linked, however, in that poor risk communication often produces intense crises. Conversely, good risk communication can avert or diminish the impact of a crisis event.

The value of risk communication can clearly be seen in the example provided in the introduction to this chapter. The discussion of biotechnology is firmly rooted in the future. No serious problems have been documented, but there is lingering concern that, in the long run, biotechnology could produce unforeseen problems. Those on both sides of the issue speculate about future problems. One side anticipates a food shortage without biotechnology. The other side remains concerned that biotechnology could ultimately prove harmful to the food supply. The evidence is highly technical, but both sides eventually seek to persuade consumers to believe their interpretation. As the debate continues, stories about advances in biotechnology and European resistance are often featured in the media. Thus, risk communication offers Opportunity 1.

> Opportunity 1
>
> Effective risk communication can disrupt a crisis and prevent it from reaching its full magnitude.

TABLE 10.1 ■ Distinguishing Risk From Crisis

Risk	Crisis
Future oriented	Specific incident
Messages of reducing likelihood	Messages of blame and consequences
Based on what is currently known	Based on the known and unknown
Long term	Short term
Technical experts, scientists	Authoritative figures
Personal scope	Community perspective
Mediated communication campaigns	Press conferences, press releases, speeches
Controlled and structured	Spontaneous and reactive

Identifying Risk

The first step in eliminating or managing risk is *risk identification*. The process includes recognizing an evolving risk, learning about it, prioritizing it compared with other risks, and changing behavior in order to eliminate or minimize it. In this next section, we describe the role mindfulness plays in the risk identification process.

Mindfulness

If we have any hope of avoiding crises by recognizing risk, we must, in Langer's (1989) terms, forgo mindless behavior and embrace mindfulness. *Mindfulness* requires us to constantly adapt our perceptual skills to account for the ever-changing world around us (see Table 10.2). To do so, we must be willing to see new categories of problems and solutions rather than forcing the evidence we observe to fit into the existing categories we have been taught. Prior to the Ebola crisis of 2014, most hospitals, nurses, and physicians thought little about screening patients or treating the disease on U.S. soil. When Thomas Eric Duncan entered Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital suffering from the disease, these assumptions changed. Standard procedures for screening and treating patients with highly infectious diseases failed, and two nurses who treated Duncan were infected with Ebola. Although both nurses eventually recovered, the National Nurses United, a union representing nurses, complained that the hospital's reaction fell short of mindfulness. The union complained that the hospital's guidelines were changing daily and that protocols for dealing with a deadly virus were not in place prior to the crisis (Shoichet, 2014). The good news is that the events in Dallas inspired hospitals nationwide to take a more mindful approach to preparing protocols for treating and coping with exceptionally dangerous viruses, such as Ebola.

Mindfulness also requires that risk observers be aware of new information. Think how airport security has changed, for example. Airlines now have more information about each passenger than was ever possible prior to 9/11. The hope is that, by acquiring additional information and developing lists of suspicious individuals, airlines will be able to identify and detain high-risk passengers. Similarly, the near tragic consequences of diseases, such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and avian flu, have resulted in a more mindful approach by WHO. Potentially threatening symptoms are now recorded, shared internationally, and tracked in a more efficient and potentially insightful manner than ever in the history of modern medicine. This attention to new information is designed to catch a potential epidemic or pandemic in its earliest stages.

Last, mindfulness requires individuals to be aware of more than one perspective. If we insist that our point of view is the only acceptable interpretation of a situation, we have little hope of engaging in effective communication. If we cannot see the concerns and fears of others, we cannot understand their resistance to new ideas. For example, Monsanto developed a genetically modified form of wheat that was not susceptible to herbicides. The result was a form of wheat that could be grown cheaply and more efficiently. When farmers overwhelmingly resisted use of the new product, Monsanto officials were shocked. The company had failed to account for the genuine fear farmers and many consumers have that genetically modified plants could potentially disrupt the ecosystem, rendering entire regions barren. Monsanto may never have seen such fears as legitimate. The company should, however, have seen the potential resistance in

the consumers for whom the product was designed. Monsanto simply did not take the farmers' perspective into account.

The notion of mindfulness has appeal for organizations of all types. After all, if organizations can be mindful of risks, they can ultimately avoid crises and save money. This need is particularly great for operations such as nuclear power plants, airlines, and food processing plants, where the potential for crisis is constantly present.

Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) observed five applications of mindfulness in organizations that have managed to maintain impressive records of safety, despite intense potential for crisis. These characteristics include

1. preoccupation with failure,
2. reluctance to simplify interpretations,
3. sensitivity to operations,
4. commitment to resilience, and
5. deference to expertise.

Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) call organizations that maintain these characteristics *high reliability organizations*. These agencies are constantly preoccupied with the possibility that a misstep could lead to crisis. Therefore, they are reluctant to simplify any new evidence that could be a sign of risk. High reliability organizations are sensitive to all operations in all parts of the organization. This sensitivity allows for a mindful approach to training and monitoring. High reliability organizations also commit themselves to resilience, which allows them to learn from any failure that they make, no matter how small. We talked about the importance of learning through failure in Chapter 9. Last, high reliability organizations defer decision making to the person with the greatest expertise. Instead of centralizing all decision making with a single individual who cannot possibly understand all the intricacies of every form of operation in an organization, whenever possible, decision making rests with those who know the most about the situation. Naturally, these decisions are made with the rest of the organization in mind. By holding to these standards, high reliability organizations manage risk in a highly mindful manner. This idea is reflected in Opportunity 2.

> Opportunity 2
>
> A mindful outlook is essential to recognizing new risks.

TABLE 10.2 ■ Mindlessness Versus Mindfulness

Mindlessness	Mindfulness
Trapped by categories	Creation of new categories
Automatic behavior	Openness to new information
Acting from a single perspective	Awareness of more than one perspective

Analyzing Multiple Audiences

As we mentioned earlier in this chapter, the NRC endorses a form of risk communication that is interactive in nature. This process functions best as a dialogue or meaningful conversation among all parties who might be affected by a risk. Although the importance and ethical integrity of such a dialogue seems obvious, many cases exist now and have existed in the past where dialogue has been discarded for monologue. In a dialogue, at least two parties discuss an issue and decide what will happen. In a monologue, one party makes a decision and tells the other party or parties what will be done. To better explain this difference, we turn to the dialogue-centered versus technology-centered dichotomy (see Table 10.3).

From a communication perspective, the dialogue-centered and technology-centered philosophies are complete opposites. When the dialogue-centered approach is the primary communication philosophy in a risk situation, the costs and benefits to stakeholders are analyzed in a democratic process: All stakeholders in a risk environment are invited to share their opinions. In the end, a decision is made by the stakeholders that take into consideration the greatest good for the greatest number. For example, many states have opted to increase the speed limits on public highways. This issue is often put to a vote, either to the general population or by elected representatives. Traffic fatalities and road quality are two of the primary topics that arise in public debate and discussion over the higher limits.

In contrast, if the technology-centered approach is the operative philosophy in a risk communication situation, experts are called on to make recommendations based on their sophisticated knowledge of the subject and situation. These recommendations are then translated into laws and regulations for managing situations. For example, emission standards for factories are seldom open to public debate. Subject matter experts debate the issue, and national standards are set, often changing as one U.S. presidential administration leaves office and another arrives. Few citizens could engage in a coherent and informed discussion of the details about allowable emission levels.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches. The technology-centered advantages are *efficiency* and *complexity*. None of us has the time or desire to study every technical matter that poses some risk to our well-being. We typically trust experts who advise governing officials on matters of public safety. Most of us think very little about the packaged food we eat. We trust that officials from the USDA and FDA have our well-being in mind. We thereby assume that they have established appropriate standards. Not only do we lack the time needed to make such observations, but most of us also lack the expertise. Relatively few citizens have a sophisticated understanding of microbiology. We defer to technical experts in this area to tell us what is and is not safe to eat.

The technology-centered approach loses credibility, however, when the public loses trust in the ability or willingness of technical experts to communicate honestly and without bias. This problem can best be understood by the following equation developed by Peter Sandman (1993, 2000):

Risk *f* {Hazard + Outrage}

Sandman's equation distinguishes between *hazard*, the scientifically determined risk level, and *outrage*, the public's perceived risk level. Simply put, if the public perceives that something is of high risk, scientific experts will have a very difficult time convincing them otherwise. Conversely, if the public perceives that something is not a high risk, scientific experts will have a very difficult time convincing the public that it is. Leiss (2003) argues that, "the golden rule for risk managers is: always focus on the linked hazard-plus-concern" (p. 369).

Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), known to the general public as *mad cow disease*, provides a clear example of public outrage outpacing a scientific hazard. You may recall that the discovery of BSE in the United Kingdom resulted in hundreds of thousands of animals being destroyed. In reality, BSE has a very low likelihood of entering the food supply in the United States. The disease has an even lower potential for infecting humans who ingest contaminated meat. Still, there is a possibility, albeit very small, that an infected animal theoretically could reach the food supply and infect consumers. This small risk caused Oprah Winfrey to declare on her program that she would never eat beef again. Public outrage over BSE, not only in the United States but also internationally, devastated Canadian beef producers after several infected cows were discovered in that country. The United States has taken extreme measures to make certain that no cow showing symptoms even remotely similar to BSE can enter the food supply. In June 2005, Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns announced that a suspicious cow had been identified, destroyed, and tested before it entered the food supply. When the animal tested positive for a strain of BSE, Johanns sought to avoid further intensification of public outrage by making the following statement:

> I am encouraged that our interlocking safeguards are working exactly as intended. . . . This animal was blocked from entering the food supply because of the firewalls we have in place. Americans have every reason to continue to be confident in the safety of our beef. ("U.S. Confirms," 2005, p. A4)

In his statements, Johanns recognized that public outrage would not permit him to deemphasize the hazard of BSE. He wisely recognized public concern and emphasized the protective strategies the USDA had developed since the first case of BSE was dis-

covered in the United States two years earlier.

The strength of the dialogue-centered philosophy is that, by its nature, it takes into account the public's outrage. Through dialogue, public concerns are heard and considered in the development of risk management practices. This has clearly been the case in dealing with BSE. There are, however, several weaknesses with the dialogue-centered philosophy. These weaknesses are diametrically opposed to the strengths of the technology-centered approach. The dialogue-centered approach functions very slowly, and the opinions shared by the general public are not always based on fact. Thus, if a community functioned solely under the philosophy of the dialogue-centered approach, it could not respond with urgency to a threatening situation. Worse, a totally democratic process could result in an uninformed public actually endorsing very risky behavior.

Rowan (1995) offers a helpful compromise to the tension between the technology-centered and the dialogue-centered approaches. She explains that engaging in the democratic process does not in and of itself mean that we will arrive at the best decision regarding a risk situation. Rowan is concerned about a dialogue process that "tries to outlaw an important communication skill: persuasion" (p. 303). She offers the warning, however, that such persuasion by any party in a risk debate should only occur after a careful examination of the evidence. Unfortunately, persuasive messages are often delivered prematurely by biased individuals and organizations that "should be listening or gathering information rather than attempting to persuade" (p. 303), she explains. Ultimately, Rowan advocates an interactive approach that is "most likely to secure the best possible technical knowledge about hazards and the best possible methods of addressing stakeholders' concerns" (p. 304). This compromise is summarized in Opportunity 3.

TABLE 10.3 ■ Dialogue Centered Versus Technology Centered

Dialogue Centered	Technology Centered
Democratic, with all sides having a say in the matter	Decision making focused on subject matter experts
Matters of perception addressed as needed	Perceptions dismissed in favor of a series of facts determined by subject matter experts
Assumes subjectivity but works toward objectivity through dialogue and inquiry	Assumes objectivity through science but can be influenced by subjective interests

Opportunity 3

Risk communication must account for both hazard and outrage.

Convergence Theory and Risk Communication

Palenchar and Heath (2002) explain that the universal objective of risk messages is to promote accurate and ethical decision making about risk issues. Although this objective is straightforward, the complexity of risk issues can cause communicators to lose focus. Many risk issues cause deep divisions among parties. For example, the prevalence of climate change—or the lack thereof—has fostered intense debate because of what Palenchar and Heath call "competing scientific conclusions" (p. 130). Interpretations of climate change evidence range from complete denial of its existence to claims that we have passed the tipping point and that no human effort can reverse the damage to Earth's atmosphere. When such debates about risk issues occur among experts, they "are apt to heighten public uncertainty about what the facts really are, increase doubts about whether the hazards are really understood, and decrease the credibility of official spokespersons" (Kasperson et al., 2000, p. 242). In such contentious cases, sorting through the available risk messages is both difficult and confusing for the lay public.

Convergence theory offers an explanation of how such public debates over risk issues are received, sorted, and assessed by the lay public (Sellnow, Ulmer, Seeger, & Littlefield, 2009). Convergence theory is based on Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's (1969) notion of interacting arguments. They explain that the audience's understanding of a contested risk issue, such as climate change, "shifts each moment as argumentation [public debate] proceeds" (p. 460). In other words, the arguments of opposing parties interact to form a new understanding of the issue.

As arguments interact, both risk communicators and the lay audiences ascertain the strength and weakness of the arguments. Arguments are weak when they have little support and establish a position outside the parameters of competing arguments. Arguments are strong when at least a portion of their reasoning shares a commonality with other reasonable parties involved in the debate (Sellnow et al., 2009). This commonality, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) explain, is "almost always recognized," because the "likelihood that several entirely erroneous arguments would reach the same result is very small" (p. 471).

When risk issues are contested in a public setting, Sellnow and colleagues (2009) explain that convergence functions systematically:

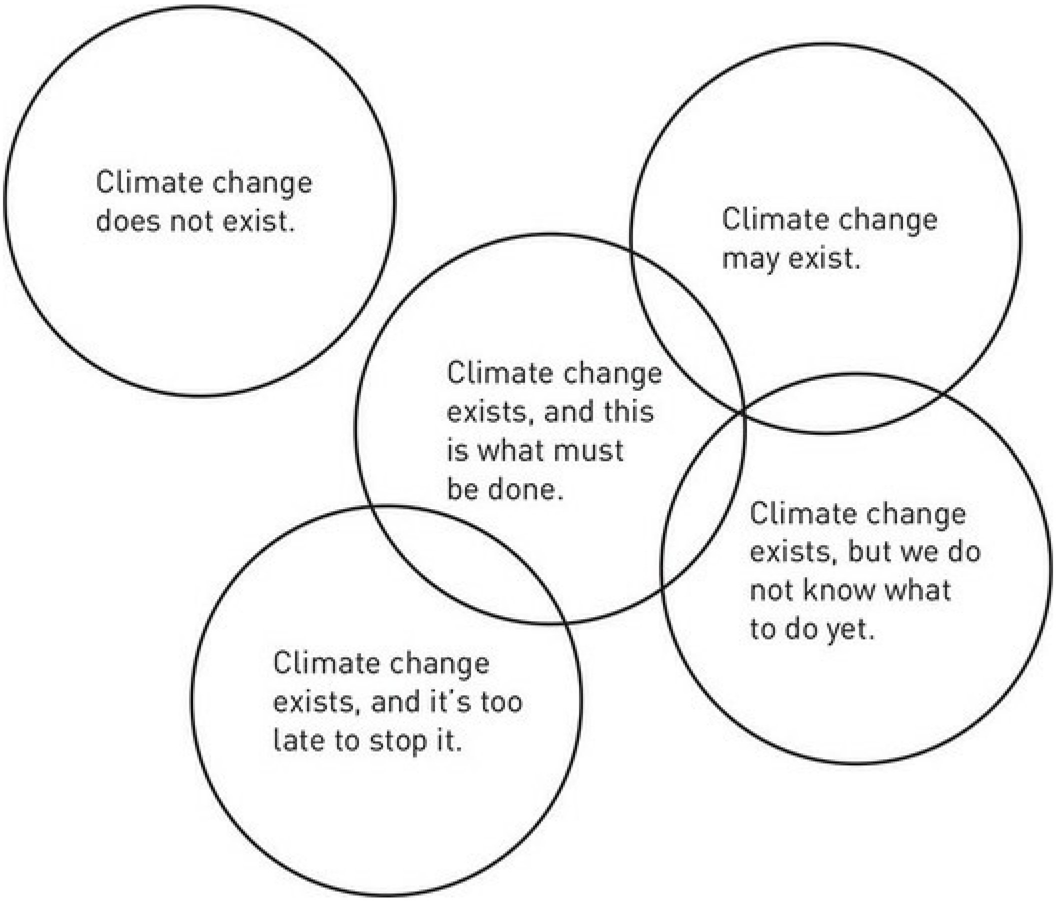
> We see convergence as the primary objective in risk communication. The uncertainty in risk situations gives rise to competing claims about the levels of danger and about the appropriate means for responding. Thus, diverse arguments emerge. As the public observes these arguments, it is unlikely to fully accept one

> line of reasoning and totally reject another. Instead, the public is likely to *make sense* of the issue by observing ways in which the arguments interact. (p. 12)

Anthony, Sellnow, and Millner (2013) identified three central propositions that describe how individuals engage in the message convergence process. First, Anthony et al. observed that individuals actively seek and can recognize points of convergence within competing arguments. When these points of convergence are recognized, they are highly persuasive to audiences. Second, convergence is most persuasive to audiences when the issue under consideration is important to them. Reflecting on our discussion above, audiences see the greatest importance in issues that outrage them or have great personal significance to their lives. Third, convergence can change over time. In some cases, new evidence can make widely held assumptions obsolete. In the 1950s, for example, television commercials for cigarettes quoted medical doctors as saying one brand was better for one's throat than others. This tolerance for smoking among physicians changed dramatically as evidence of the health risks were widely publicized in the 1960s. Ongoing research suggests that a fourth proposition is warranted. That is, individuals can and do actively seek to diminish convergence in the eyes of others by making claims that the existing evidence is flawed or that new evidence has emerged. For example, vaccinations were hailed for decades as a solution to long-dreaded diseases such as polio, measles, whooping cough, and others. In the past decade, however, immunization rates have declined as opponents argue that the vaccines themselves are a serious risk.

The interaction of these propositions can be seen through the climate change example introduced above. Figure 10.1 displays several competing positions on the climate change issue. The positions range from the complete extremes that climate change is a myth to the position that climate change is so severe that it cannot be reversed. In this case, the majority of the positions at least acknowledge the existence of climate change. Hence, the varying positions offer strength to the converging position that climate change exists to some degree. Complete denial of climate change is a weak argument in that it does not converge with the other positions (Sellnow et al., 2009). Convergence is represented in the diagram by the points of intersection in the circles. In this example, the likely conclusion is that climate change is a risk, but how to deal with it is still not understood.

Figure 10.1 Communication Convergence Climate Change


Climate change does not exist.
Climate change may exist.
Climate change exists, and this is what must be done.
Climate change exists, but we do not know what to do yet.
Climate change exists, and it's too late to stop it.

Responsible Risk Communication

Consideration of the dialogue-centered approach, the technology-centered approach, hazards, and outrage can make crisis communication seem overwhelming. Trying to communicate responsibly in a complex situation may appear to be a daunting task. Having considered this challenge for quite some time, we believe we have arrived at a straightforward and reasonable approach: We introduce significant choice as the foundation for responsible risk communication. We also contrast significant choice with fantasy messages that are designed to mislead the public.

Significant Choice

Nilsen (1974) is credited with developing the concept of *significant choice* within the context of communication studies. Nilsen explains that a good share of human dignity resides in the capacity to make rational decisions. As risk communicators, we often seek to influence those decisions. If we provide unclear or biased information to stakeholders, we can corrupt the decision-making process. Significant choice represents the ideal circumstances for free and informed decision making. Nilsen asserts that stakeholders engage in significant choice when the following five standards are met:

1. Stakeholders are free from physical or mental coercion.
2. The choice is made based on all the information that is available.
3. All reasonable alternatives are included in the discussion.
4. Both short-term and long-term consequences are disclosed and discussed.
5. Both senders and receivers of messages are open about the personal motives they have that may influence their decision making.

These five standards provide an initial framework for avoiding bias and manipulation in risk communication. When applied effectively, according to Nilsen, significant choice creates a marketplace of ideas where various viewpoints can be heard and understood for what they are. Hearing these viewpoints, stakeholders can make objective decisions that they believe to be in their best interests.

While emphasizing the five standards for open communication, Nilsen (1974) cautions against several forms of communication that could diminish the opportunity for significant choice. Nilsen labels these forms of problematic communication "misinformation" (p. 71). Misinformation includes the following characteristics:

- Incomplete information
- Biased information
- Statistical units that may be inadequately defined or incomplete
- Vague or ambiguous terminology in which listeners find erroneous meanings
- Implied relationships between the issue under discussion and other issues when in fact no relationship exists (for example, guilt by association)
- A false sense of urgency or false sense of importance
- Highly emotionalized language, which may distort meaning (pp. 71–72)

For significant choice to occur, then, communicators must meet the five standards discussed earlier and avoid the seven forms of misinformation. As risk communicators, we should strive to meet these standards and avoid these pitfalls. As receivers of risk communication, we should demand that speakers hold to these standards and object if we feel they are engaging in misinformation. Above all, risk communication functions

best when risk communicators serve as “honest brokers” of information for their stakeholders (Horlick-Jones, Sime, & Pidgeon, 2003).

Fantasy Messages

The greatest threat to significant choice is our vulnerability to messages that tell us what we *want* to hear even when the messages sound too good to be true. Despite familiarity with the age-old adage, "Anything that sounds too good to be true probably is," many of us on occasion fall victim to what Perrow (1999) calls *fantasy messages*. Perrow explains that fantasy messages tell the public what it wants to believe by producing exaggerated crisis management and risk assessment plans that create a fantasy of safety. Perrow argues, for example, that Exxon used their crisis plans as fantasy documents rather than blueprints for action to avoid discussing the real risk of oil transportation in Alaska. Perrow explains that either intentionally or unintentionally, the biases of risk communicators can overwhelm them, leading to deceptive communication that boldly overstates the merits of one position while dismissing all others.

Fantasy messages are an ever-present part of our lives. Advertisers tell us their products will change our lives in ways that sound too good to be true. In early adolescence, we come to realize that such messages cannot be taken seriously. As consumers of risk communication messages, we must be equally vigilant. If a risk communicator discusses only one side of an issue, we should demand to hear the other sides as well. If a risk communicator oversimplifies an issue or uses language and terminology we cannot hope to decipher, we should demand that the message be provided in a clear and appropriate manner. The concept of significant choice offers a time-tested set of standards to which all risk communication should be held. Thus, we offer Opportunity 4.

> Opportunity 4
>
> To ensure social responsibility, all risk communication should be held to the standard of significant choice.

Summary

Every crisis event, no matter how baffling, has some degree of warning before it occurs. This warning is risk. Risk may be readily apparent, as in the shocking maneuvers of athletes in events such as the X Games or the death-defying antics of motorcycle jumpers. Most often, however, risk is subtle. If we are to identify, learn from, and communicate responsibly about risk, we would be wise to keep the following opportunities in mind:

Most important, effective risk communication allows for interaction among all stakeholders in any risk situation. To maximize this interaction, risk communicators should be conscious of the various needs of diverse stakeholders.

> Opportunity 1: Effective risk communication can disrupt a crisis and prevent it from reaching its full magnitude.
> Opportunity 2: A mindful outlook is essential to recognizing new risks.
> Opportunity 3: Risk communication must account for both hazard and outrage.
> Opportunity 4: To ensure social responsibility, all risk communication should be held to the standard of significant choice.

11 Responding to the Ethical Demands of Crisis

Confronted with the accusations of lying to the public, investors, and his own employees about the status of his company, Enron CEO Kenneth Lay denied he had done anything wrong. He claimed that his employees had misled him and that he was not responsible for Enron's illegal and deceptive business practices. It was later revealed that Enron executives had manipulated stock prices, created intentional electricity shortages so that they could charge higher rates, and bribed government officials.

The collapse of Enron resulted in hundreds of employees losing their jobs and wiped out the retirement savings of many more. Kenneth Lay, like many other CEOs involved in financial crisis, used the *hear no evil, see no evil* defense to claim that he did not know what was going on in his own company.

In April of 2013, an 11-story building in Bangladesh housing five clothing factories collapsed, killing over 1,000 workers and injuring 2,500 more. The factories produced low-cost garments for well-known retailers, including Benetton, The Gap, and Children's Palace. The owner of the building had been informed of dangerous cracks in the walls and the floors and had told workers to ignore them. Initially, politicians claimed that the building collapse was not significant. Protests by garment workers and international outrage over the deaths prompted several arrests, including the building owner.

Garment industry working conditions in developing countries have been severely criticized for their unethical practices. This includes hiring of underage workers, paying very low wages, and creating unsafe working conditions. The retailers rely on very cheap labor in developing countries to produce high-profit products for sale in Europe and the United States. Critics charge they exploit workers and put them at risk to protect large profits.

The crises at Enron, Bangladesh, and the Catholic Church child sex scandal illustrate the role of ethics in organizational crisis: Many crises are created by unethical and even illegal conduct by organizations. Illegal and deceptive business practices; unsafe working conditions; insider trading; knowingly selling defective products; misleading marketing claims; discrimination of women, minorities, and LGBT people; sexual harassment; bribery; and kickbacks; among many other unethical business practices, have led to crises. GM's crisis involving defective ignition switches was caused in part by withholding information from the public.

In addition, almost all crises, even if they were not caused by unethical conduct, have ethical implications. The 1989 Exxon *Valdez* oil spill, for example, raised questions

about blame and responsibility, about environmental exploitation, and about the rights of native people. The 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan raised questions about the safe use of nuclear energy and the right of access to information about radiation exposure. The Flint water crisis involved officials ignoring the concerns of the public and raised questions about social justice and the treatment of children and minorities.

In this chapter, we define ethics and values and describe some of the key ethical issues and values that arise during a crisis. It is important to recognize that ethics are always part of any crisis situation and failure to address ethics can make the crisis much worse. We also describe some of the ways in which values and ethics can create opportunities that inform an effective response.

Ethics

Ethics concern basic judgments of right and wrong, good and bad, and desirable and undesirable. Ethics are the values, standards, morals, principles, or guidelines we use for making these judgments. We all make ethical judgments every day. Ethical issues and questions arise whenever a situation or a decision has the potential to affect another person. A situation where someone is discriminated against is unethical because of the impact on that person. Some kinds of persuasion are considered deceptive and unfair to the person being targeted. Lying is unethical, because it denies the person being lied to accurate information.

It is important to remember, however, that everyone occasionally uses small so-called white lies to help manage their lives (Bok, 1979). There is some disagreement about whether these white lies are unethical, because they generally do very little if any harm. As the potential impact on others becomes greater, issues take on more ethical significance. During a crisis, the potential to harm others is often quite large, and therefore, the ethical implications are very great (Simola, 2003; Wilkins, 2010).

Ethical judgments are based on specific values that we have learned and internalized. We all make many ethical judgments every day. We may see a politician trying to spin a particular issue in a way that we judge as misleading and deceptive. We may make purchasing decisions about a product based on how we judge the behavior of the company. Seeing a friend lying to others may make us less interested in spending time with that person. In evaluating or judging behaviors as *wrong* or *unethical*, we are applying some set of standards or values about what we think is appropriate behavior. We may believe, for example, that politicians should not lie or distort the truth and that lying is simply wrong. We may believe that companies should respect the environment and that they should act responsibly in dealing with potentially toxic materials.

Many people reacted negatively to the child sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church. The behaviors of the priests involved were judged as fundamentally unethical and immoral, because they were entirely inconsistent with the values and norms of the church. Basic values about appropriate sexual behavior (Catholic priests take vows of celibacy) and protecting children were violated. In addition, many observers believed that the church responded unethically by refusing to accept responsibility and by trying to hide these cases. By hiding the abuse, the church allowed the abuse to continue. The British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 created significant harm to the environment, to the fishing and tourism industries, and to many communities. Basic values about respect for the environment were violated, because close to 5 million barrels of oil were spilled into the Gulf. Some critics suggested that BP tried to minimize the harm and withhold information about the size of the spill and its im-

pact.

Ethical judgments help inform our behaviors and choices. While no one acts in an ethical manner all the time, most of us at least recognize when we are behaving in ways that might be judged as unethical. In addition, we may choose to avoid interacting with others whom we judge as unethical. A *good* person, for example, is more likely to be believed. This also holds true for our choices about doing business with particular organizations. An organization with a good reputation may have more support from its public and stakeholders than one judged as bad or unethical. Many people stopped giving money to the Catholic Church following the sex scandals. Many people cut up their Exxon credit cards following the *Valdez* oil spill. Some people chose not to buy GM cars because of the ignition switch scandal.

These ethical judgments, however, are not easy to make. The circumstances are complicated and the values not always clear. Some people look to universal ethical standards that can apply in all circumstances and for all people. While universal standards would make ethical judgments much easier, most researchers agree that the specific situation is an important factor in determining how to apply ethics. In addition, ethical standards vary quite widely among cultures, communities, and professional groups. What might be considered an appropriate ethical standard for attorneys might be very different in the case of a public relations professional. What is considered ethical conduct in China might not be considered acceptable in South Africa or Brazil. This creates many challenges when a crisis extends across international or intercultural boundaries.

In most cases, ethical judgments are more comprehensive when they take into account situational factors, different values and cultures, competing loyalties, and complex duties and obligations. These are the conditions faced in most organizations where multiple stakeholders are involved (Christensen & Kohls, 2003).

Corporations as Moral Agents

One of the complexities that relates to organizational ethics concerns the question: Can an organization act in a moral or immoral way? After all, organizations aren't people. Philosophers often argue that only humans are moral agents and only they can make moral judgments. Organizations, because they are not humans, cannot be held to human-based ethical standards. Based on this, some have argued that only individual managers can be held morally accountable. When an organization does something wrong, it must be traced back to the individual manager (the moral agent) who made that decision. If a responsible manager can't be found, then it would be inappropriate to hold the organization as a whole accountable, because it is not a moral agent. Others have suggested that often the individual manager is just a scapegoat for some unethical organizational conduct, and the organization as a whole should be held morally accountable. Organizations, however, often act in collective ways like a moral agent. A third view is that the organization and the managers who make the decisions about organizational activities should both be held accountable. In this way, society can help ensure that accountability exists and that organizations are forced to act in ethical ways (Seeger & Kuhn, 2011).

In many cases of unethical conduct leading to a crisis, there is a debate about who is responsible and who should be held accountable. This occurs because the causes of crises are often confused, uncertain, and unclear, especially at the early stages. Because organizations and individuals want to avoid responsibility, they sometimes try and shift blame. In the case of Enron, which we discussed earlier, the senior managers claimed that they didn't know what was happening and sought to shift blame to one another. While senior managers had obviously acted in unethical ways, the company's entire culture was one that promoted unethical conduct. In the case of Enron, both managers and the entire organization were eventually held accountable. Sadly, lower level employees were badly hurt when the company went bankrupt. In the case of the BP spill, questions were raised about the company that owned the drilling rig and the contractors who had helped install some of the safety equipment: BP argued that these groups also shared responsibility. The question of moral agency is important, because it often determines who will be held responsible for unethical behavior.

Values

As noted earlier, ethical judgments are based on values (Beyer & Lutze, 1993). *Values* are the larger lessons we have learned that inform our attitudes, beliefs, and ultimately, ethical judgments. They are the more specific ought tos, shoulds, ideals, norms, morals, and goals that exist throughout any society, culture, or community. For example, many communication students have learned to value free speech and expression, diversity of opinion, and the free flow of information. The health care profession teaches values of supportiveness, nurturing, and caring for the sick and less fortunate. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) suggests the core values of advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness are instrumental to its profession ("PRSA Member Statement," 2000). Most schools of business teach their students principles of social responsibility along with the values associated with profits. Of course, values are also taught at home and through religion. Thus, values are everywhere in our lives.

What is particularly interesting is that not everyone agrees that the same set of values is most important in any given situation. Some people value personal freedom and personal choice, while others place more importance on religious values and the sanctity of all human life. This value conflict underlies the ongoing abortion debate. In organizations, values concerning profitability and economic gain often conflict with values concerning the well-being of employees or the environment. Values vary widely from individual to individual, context to context, organization to organization, and culture to culture. The fact that not everyone agrees with the same set of values is often described as the *competing value view*. There is almost always a disagreement in any given situation over which values are most important and which values might apply. Often, before a decision can be made, these values need to be discussed, debated, and sorted out.

In one relevant case, a city in California experienced an earthquake. Residents were afraid to return to their houses because of potential aftershocks and had gathered in city parks. The city had to decide whether or not to set up tents for them. The police chief argued against setting up tents, claiming that he could not ensure security and public order and that people should be encouraged to disperse. The emergency management director argued that tents were necessary to ensure the welfare and psychological well-being of the community. In this case, values related to security were in conflict with those involving public welfare. The mayor, taking into account the situation, decided that the tents would go up.

In the Flint water crisis, values about the safety of public health came into conflict with values about costs.

During the 2009 H1N1 “swine” flu outbreak, many schools and colleges were encouraged to reconsider their attendance policies. Public health officials, who value the well-being of the public, pointed out that having sick students come to class would increase the spread of the disease and make the pandemic much worse. Schools and colleges, however, value learning and education and were reluctant to change their attendance policies. One university tried to balance these competing values with the following message:

> “Penn State is following public health recommendations that request that ill individuals stay away from school, work and group activities. We strongly urge students with influenza symptoms to follow self-isolation guidelines noted above . . . Faculty have been asked to make every reasonable effort to enable students to complete their courses while recognizing that it is imperative that infected students follow the non-attendance self-isolation guidelines.” (Penn State University, 2009)

In this case, competing values were balanced.

Values and Crisis

As these examples illustrate, ethical questions are almost always important considerations following a crisis. In addition, crises often create the need to balance competing values. Crises, by definition, have created some harm and have the potential to create even more. Often, a crisis creates victims who are physically, psychologically, and economically vulnerable. Crises also tend to disproportionately affect those who are already vulnerable, because they are poor, disabled, or have underlying health issues. Values that are important during times of normalcy and stability may not be as critical during a crisis situation. In many cases, short-term concerns about budgets need to be set aside so that the immediate needs of victims can be addressed.

Three ethical standards often become prominent in crisis situations: responsibility and accountability, access to information, and the ethic of humanistic care.

Responsibility and Accountability

Following a crisis, there is almost always an effort to sort out what went wrong and why. Part of this process is to determine who might be responsible or culpable. Responsibility is a broad, ethical concept that refers to the fact that individuals and groups have morally based obligations and duties to others and to larger ethical and moral codes, standards, and traditions. In addition, responsibility concerns who or what caused a particular outcome. If someone freely made a choice that led to a particular outcome, then he or she is responsible for that outcome. If I run a stop sign and cause an accident, I am responsible for that accident. I may then be asked to give an account of my actions. If an organization takes some action that causes harm, such as creating a crisis, it too is responsible and will likely be forced to account for those actions. Thus, responsibility and accountability are closely related ethical concepts.

As we described in Chapter 4, many of the approaches associated with post-crisis communication are image restoration strategies designed to respond to the crisis or offer an account or explanation of what happened. Image restoration strategies are also frequently used to limit or contain an organization's responsibility, which might also mean less legal liability. In general, accepting responsibility for actions is considered ethical (Benoit, 1995; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000). This includes taking action to help victims, providing support and resources, and helping alleviate and contain the harm. Seeking to avoid or deny responsibility would be considered unethical conduct. This includes denying that any harm occurred, shifting blame to others, and refusing to provide assistance to victims on the grounds that it might create legal liability. Following the *Valdez* oil spill, Exxon blamed the captain of the ship for the accident, America's driving habits for the need to transport oil, and the state of Alaska for interfering with the cleanup. This example also illustrates the problem of corporate moral agency we described earlier in this chapter. In addition to the role of responsibility in post-crisis situations, organizations also have ethical responsibilities before a crisis occurs. They are ethically obligated to exercise care in their decisions and operations so that harm does not occur. Machinery should be maintained. Workers should be trained appropriately. Procedures for handling dangerous chemicals need to be established so that no one is harmed. Safety should be taken seriously. Most important, managers have an ethical responsibility to monitor their organizations for warning signs of any impending crisis and must act on those warnings. Organizations also have an obligation to communicate realistically about any risks associated with their products. Tobacco companies, for example, have been forced to carry warnings about the health effects of their products. Opportunity 1, then, involves the role of responsibility in crisis communication. Accepting responsibility is an opportunity for an organization to demonstrate its values and ethical stance. Organizations that embrace ethics early in a crisis are more likely to be able to move quickly toward renewal than those that get

caught up in protracted debates about blame and responsibility.

> Opportunity 1
>
> Organizations are better able to generate productive crisis responses if they are willing to accept responsibility for any actions that may have caused the crisis.

Access to Information

As mentioned earlier, fundamental values of communication are free speech and expression and the free flow of information. In general, an ethical obligation exists to provide people with the information necessary for them to make informed choices. This obligation is sometimes referred to as *significant choice*, because it gives people information they need to make important and/or significant choices. Organizations dealing with toxic chemicals, for example, have a moral obligation to inform members of the surrounding community of the potential risks, so community members can make informed choices about how to respond. Drug companies list the risks of using drugs, including side effects, on their labels. The government often mandates these warnings, and they serve to give consumers information for making informed choices about significant issues.

Any kind of deception is ethically questionable, because it restricts the freedom of the person being deceived. Lies place the liar in a powerful position over those being lied to. The person being lied to does not have the information necessary to make an informed choice. As we discussed in Chapter 9, during the Bhopal disaster, where as many as 5,000 people may have died, Union Carbide sought to manage the public concerns associated with its plants by describing the insecticide it produced as benign plant medicines. This subtle description helped reduce the level of public apprehension about the chemical facility, and this meant that residents could not make fully informed choices about the risks. Similarly, as we discussed in Chapter 5, a very effective public relations campaign helped convince the residents of Alaska that oil exploration and shipping was safe and that a major spill was unlikely. The public eventually supported building a terminal in Valdez, Alaska, and allowed oil to be shipped through Prince William Sound. The fact that people believed that a spill was very unlikely may have contributed to an attitude of complacency and ultimately may have contributed to the Exxon spill and delayed the cleanup.

In some cases, organizations try to avoid providing information, because it is too costly and complicated. Food companies, for example, have resisted some efforts to list the country of origin for their products. They claim that tracking and reporting this information when foods may include ingredients from dozens of countries would be too hard. Others, however, claim that consumers have a right to know where their food comes from and not having this information makes it hard to support local farmers.

Organizations sometimes withhold information or temporarily postpone its release for a variety of ethically justifiable reasons. In the case of an airline disaster, for example, families of victims are usually notified before passenger lists are released to the press. This action respects the rights of the families. School crisis plans sometimes include

provisions to protect the privacy of students.

Organizational crises are public events that create a great deal of close media attention. There is usually much pressure to be open, truthful, and honest. However, organizations often choose to withhold information, try to remain strategically ambiguous, or simply stonewall. These kinds of responses are usually not ethically justifiable and often lead to even more damage to the organization's reputation. The severity of a crisis is usually increased by the perception that the organization is dishonest or withholding information (Benoit, 1995). In contrast, the perception that the organization has been open, honest, and forthcoming with all relevant information may reduce the seriousness of a crisis and ultimately help the organization's image. Thus, we offer Opportunity 2.

> Opportunity 2
>
> Organizations that are open and honest before and during crises are better prepared to manage and recover from the events.

Humanism and Care

An ethical standard important in many crisis conditions concerns humanistic care. *Humanism* is a philosophical standpoint and value system that emphasizes the uniqueness and inherent worth of human beings. The ethic of care concerns the duty all humans have to others and specifically requires a supportive response to individuals who have suffered some harm and who have some need (Johannesen, 2001; Simola, 2003). In some religious traditions, the ethic of care is portrayed in the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this story a person who has been injured is helped by a stranger. This story teaches the lessons that we all have obligations to help others in times of need, even strangers. This ethical perspective is often particularly important when a crisis or disaster creates victims who have suffered hardship, loss, and physical, economic, and emotional harm.

A humanistic orientation requires that organizations be sensitive to the harm that may be caused by their operations, including what could happen in a crisis. Following the death of an employee because of an organizational accident or workplace violence, many organizations provide financial assistance to the family. Counseling offered to victims, their families, and others affected is often part of a crisis response.

In one case we witnessed, a tragic shooting occurred on a college campus during finals week. Many students were very upset. The college provided psychological counseling to any student who requested it and postponed final exams for any student who felt the need for more time. The college also held memorial services and provided other kinds of support to students, faculty, and staff.

Many relief agencies, including the American Red Cross and various religiously based relief agencies, undertake caring and humanistic responses to large-scale crises. The Red Cross provides medical assistance, food, shelter, counseling, and short-term financial assistance for disaster victims. It defines its mission as the service of humanity by "providing relief to victims of disasters" and helping people "prevent, prepare for and respond to emergencies" ("What Is the Mission," 2005).

Following 9/11, hundreds of thousands of people from around the world made donations to various funds to help the victims and the families of survivors. Similar responses have occurred for most major disasters. A number of well-known celebrities have donated money and bottled water to support the community of Flint, Michigan, following the water crisis, including Cher, Eminem, Sean "Diddy" Combs, Mark Wahlberg, and Jimmy Fallon. Caring responses to the Indian Ocean tsunami included millions of dollars in private donations. Some $30 million was raised by the One Boston foundation to support the victims of the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings. Crisis often creates an opportunity for organizations and other groups and agencies to

respond in humane and caring ways, to nurture others, and to ethically respond to human suffering.

In fact, there is a natural tendency of humanistic duty, to help others following a crisis. Seeing media accounts of victims can prompt people to help out following a crisis. Organizations are part of a larger community, and they have an obligation to help other members of the community who may be suffering. Organizations also have an ethical duty to avoid harming others. They also have a duty to be supportive of those who are harmed by crises. When an organization acknowledges that following a crisis one of its first obligations is to help others, it generates good will and bolsters its reputation. This can help the organization move toward renewal. Opportunity 3 suggests that humanism and care are critical following crises.

> Opportunity 3
>
> Organizations that make humanism and care priorities before crises are better prepared for enacting these values after they have occurred.

The Role of Values in a Crisis Response

While crises always create threats and harm, they also create opportunities to clarify values and to demonstrate those values by acting in ethical manners. During a crisis, organizations often struggle to act appropriately. A crisis is an uncertain situation, and organizations sometimes simply don't know what to do. Managers are often confused and even shocked and simply cannot determine what actions to take. In these cases, it is very important to take time and think about the ethical implications of decisions and actions. This includes thinking carefully about whom the stakeholders potentially impacted by the crisis are, what their values are, how they might be impacted, and what duties and obligations the organization has to these stakeholders. Stakeholders for a crisis may include customers, suppliers, employees, members of the community, crisis response agencies, and members of the media, among many others. Each of these groups will have its own values, and these values are likely to compete with other values.

One effective approach in a crisis situation where it is not clear how to respond is to consider the organization's own core values (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001). As we discussed in Chapter 7, when faced with the fact that its Tylenol product had been laced with cyanide, Johnson & Johnson turned to its corporate mission statement to determine what to do. The mission statement emphasized the company's duty to its customers, so Johnson & Johnson withdrew Tylenol from store shelves. The company received a great deal of positive publicity for its actions, which ultimately helped it recover from the crisis. Johnson & Johnson was able to survive this crisis in large part because it followed its core values in determining its response.

Recall the case where Malden Mills suffered a devastating fire at its manufacturing facility in Chapter 4. The company was in complete ruin, and workers faced losing their jobs. CEO Aaron Feuerstein chose to respond to the crisis from a well-established set of values and ethics concerning his duty to workers and to the community (Ulmer, 2001). He announced that workers would continue to be paid and that he would rebuild the company as soon as possible. Feuerstein received a great deal of support and recognition for his actions, and ultimately, he was able to rebuild the company. In fact, the new plant he built was much more efficient than the one that had been destroyed.

The Malden Mills story illustrates that a value-based response to a crisis can actually help a company renew itself. It may find new areas of support and opportunity if it responds ethically to a crisis. Cantor Fitzgerald was a bond trading company located on the top floor of the World Trade Center. The company and its CEO, Howard Lutnick, were known as cutthroat competitors who did not necessarily let ethics get in the way of profits. The attack on the World Trade Center claimed the lives of 600 CF

employees, including Lutnick's brother. Lutnick publicly appealed to people to help him rebuild his company so that he could, in turn, help support the families of those employees who died in the attack (Seeger, Ulmer, Novak, & Sellnow, 2005). Lutnick was publically acknowledging that his most important ethical obligation was to the families of his employees who had lost their lives. CF did survive, and now the company has a renewed set of values and sense of purpose based on the losses of the 9/11 attacks.

Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, faced a devastating crisis when it was revealed that the company had knowingly withheld information about defective ignition switches. In response, she offered a public apology:

> "I realize there are no words of mine that can ease their grief and pain. But as I lead GM through this crisis, I want everyone to know that I am guided by two clear principles: First, that we do the right thing for those who were harmed; and, second, that we accept responsibility for our mistakes and commit to doing everything within our power to prevent this problem from ever happening again." (GM Corporate Newsroom, 2014)

This response helped the company move past the crisis and reestablish the trust of the public.

Another effective approach to understanding values during a crisis is called *virtue ethics*. This is a traditional approach to ethics that can be traced all the way back to Aristotle. Virtue ethics suggests that people tend to act in predictable ways and follow their established patterns of conduct. Thus, a manager who has developed a habit of being honest in the past tends to be honest in the future. Honesty, in this case, is a virtue of this manager.

Virtuous responses are closely related to the development of a positive reputation and what is sometimes called the reservoir of goodwill. A reservoir of goodwill is a general public perception that the organization has been responsible, trustworthy, ethical, and so on. This public perception may have many benefits. It may create a halo effect that influences how other activities are perceived. It can reduce the impact of a crisis event. Regarding renewal, a reservoir of goodwill can generate critical public support for an organization attempting to rebuild and recreate itself following a crisis (Jones, Jones, & Little, 2000).

We have found that virtue ethics are one important factor in effective responses to crises. Organizations and senior managers who have established patterns of responsible conduct toward their stakeholders tend to follow those patterns during a crisis. Aaron Feuerstein of Malden Mills and Milt Cole of Cole Hardwood were both managers

who had established habits of being virtuous. They were fair to their workers, responsible members of their communities, and honest in their business dealings. When their companies were destroyed, they not only committed to rebuilding, but they also committed to supporting their communities. One additional benefit of virtue ethics is that it helps build a reservoir of goodwill before a crisis that the organization can draw on during a crisis. Both Milt Cole and Aaron Feuerstein had the support of stakeholders, because they had established such good relations with stakeholders before a crisis.

To recap, a value-based response to a crisis can bolster an organization's reputation, serve as a rallying point for support, and ultimately lead to renewal. Moreover, during the uncertainty and confusion of a crisis, values and ethics are important landmarks that can help an organization reorient itself and respond in an ethical manner. Two approaches involve the organization's established core values and the habits of virtuous responses established by senior managers. Thus, we offer Opportunity 4.

> Opportunity 4
>
> Organizations have a larger reservoir of goodwill and are better prepared to avoid or manage crises if they have identified, discussed, instituted, and followed core values.

Summary

Ethics and values are always part of a crisis. This includes questions of responsibility and accountability, free flows of information, and a caring, humane response. These and other values and ethics compete with one another and need to be sorted out to determine which values will take precedence. Sadly, values of profitability and self-protection often take priority over everything else. An ethical response to a crisis, however, can help bolster an organization's image and reputation and ultimately help lead an organization toward renewal.

> Opportunity 1: Organizations are better able to generate effective crisis responses if they are willing to accept responsibility for any actions they may have taken to cause the crisis.
>
> Opportunity 2: Organizations that are open and honest before and during crises are better prepared to manage and recover from the events.
>
> Opportunity 3: Organizations that make humanism and care priorities before crises are better prepared for enacting these values after they have occurred.
>
> Opportunity 4: Organizations are better prepared to avoid or manage crises if they have identified, discussed, and instituted their core values.

12 Facilitating Renewal Through Effective Crisis Communication

The focus of this book has been on taking the challenges crises present and, when possible, identifying and enhancing the opportunities that arise. As we discussed in the first chapter, we see crises as turning points for organizations and communities. Throughout the book, we have provided evidence that crises can be viewed as *dangers and opportunities*. We believe that mindfully considering crises as containing the elements of both danger and opportunity is essential to effective crisis communication. In this concluding chapter, we build on the lessons, cases, and opportunities to further discuss the theory of crisis communication called the *discourse of renewal*. The discourse of renewal describes, explains, and provides a prescriptive approach to communicating during a crisis (Ulmer, 2012; Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007). In the remaining chapter, we first discuss some organizations that have emphasized the opportunities associated with crises and created renewal. Second, we delineate a theory of renewal. Third, we consider crisis as an opportunity and renewal as a framework for effective crisis communication. We conclude with some ideas about how the discourse of renewal can be used to prepare for responding to crises.

Considering the Opportunities Associated With Crises

An examination of crises of all types illustrates a variety of failures in communication with relatively few examples of successful or effective responses. We argue that many of these failures are related to the threat bias we discussed in the second chapter. After reading this book and the examples provided in the middle section of the book, you should have a good idea of how emphasizing the opportunities over threat to image or reputation can be instrumental in a crisis response. As we discussed earlier in this book, one of the organizations to take a renewal approach to managing a crisis was Johnson & Johnson following the crisis that involved Tylenol pain reliever. Johnson & Johnson's response to the Tylenol tampering in 1982 is a landmark case of largely effective crisis communication (Benoit & Lindsey, 1987; Benson, 1988; Snyder & Foster, 1983). The company was widely acclaimed in its crisis response for communicating quickly about the crisis, recalling the Tylenol product immediately to protect customers, and for learning from the crisis by developing a new tamper-proof package for their product. Johnson & Johnson actually grew their market share following the crisis and increased customer loyalty to its brand. In this case, Johnson & Johnson's crisis triggered an opportunity for the organization to illustrate its value for customer safety and its commitment to learn from the crisis. After the crisis erupted, Johnson & Johnson spent little time determining responsibility or protecting its image. After its products were implicated with being tampered with cyanide, Johnson & Johnson immediately sought to make sure that its customers were safe and it could prevent the crisis from happening again. The company followed its core values in determining how to respond to the crisis.

You have read about several organizations in this book that illustrate the ability to see the opportunities available in a crisis. Organizations like Malden Mills, Cole Hardwood, King Car, Odwalla, Schwan's, and General Motors, along with community-based responses like those in Greensburg, Kansas, exemplify the characteristics of seizing the opportunities inherent in crises. Clearly, there was threat in each of these events, but these organizations also emphasized the opportunities intrinsic to the crises. What follows is a discussion of the theory of the discourse of renewal.

Theoretical Components of the Discourse of Renewal

We define *renewal* as a fresh sense of purpose and direction an organization or system discovers after it emerges from a crisis (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2009). As we briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, we see four theoretical objectives central to the discourse of renewal: organizational learning, ethical and value-based communication, a prospective rather than retrospective vision, and organizational rhetoric that is engaging and effective (see Table 12.1). These approaches to crisis communication suggest that organizations should learn from crises and illustrate learning from stakeholders through their communication. The organization should also communicate ethically and follow its core value system. We discuss what we believe constitutes ethical value-based crisis communication and how to evaluate this communication against broader ethical standards. Next, organizations need to be able to resist focusing excessively on their reputations and trying to force positive interpretations. Rather, they should emphasize a prospective vision of the future that moves the organization and its stakeholders forward. Finally, the organization's leadership should exemplify communication that models optimism and commitment to actions that can resolve the crisis. We discuss each of these objectives in more depth below.

TABLE 12.1 ■ Theoretical Elements Related to the Discourse of Renewal

1.	Organizational learning
2.	Ethical, value-based communication
3.	Prospective rather than retrospective vision following the crisis
4.	Engaged organizational rhetoric

Organizational Learning

A central feature in the crisis communication research is that learning is essential to an effective response (Elliott, Smith, & McGuinness, 2000; Kovoor-Misra & Nathan, 2000; Mittelstaedt, 2005; Nathan, 2000a, 2000b; Roux-Doufort, 2000; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998; Simon & Pauchant, 2000; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007). Chapter 9 provides an extensive view of how learning functions as an opportunity during a crisis. In short, crisis creates an opportunity for an organization to confront its problems or deficiencies. Sitkin (1996) argues that failure is an essential part of the learning process for many organizations. In this case, an organization should adopt a learning perspective in its post-crisis responses as soon as possible and communicate lessons that have been learned. This often means changes in procedures, processes, operation, and sometimes the organization's culture. Communication about learning provides organizational stakeholders with confidence that the organization has resolved the crisis.

Simon and Pauchant (2000) describe three types of learning useful for overcoming a crisis. Behavioral learning is the lowest form of learning, because changes are not internalized by members of the organization but rather are "maintained by external control, through rules, regulations or technological systems" (p. 7). In this case, the organization may be forced to change by a court ruling or by a regulatory agency.

Paradigmatic learning involves "both changes due to an external agency and changes enacted by the organization itself" (p. 7). Organizations need to take time to fully integrate the crisis lessons throughout the organization. This type of learning takes consistent training and support from the organization's leadership. It may involve the CEO speaking out about the lessons learned. Systemic learning involves an organization learning in advance of a crisis and by so doing, preventing it. Organizations seeking renewal are more likely to employ paradigmatic or systemic learning rather than having a regulatory agency enforce behavioral learning on them. Behavioral learning suggests that the organization is facing barriers to learning and as a result, needs proof that learning is taking place. Organizations seeking to create a renewing crisis response or to avoid some crises altogether should work toward systemic learning.

Elliott et al. (2000) described several barriers to organizational learning. They explain that the key barriers include:

> rigidity of core beliefs, values and assumptions, ineffective communication and information difficulties, failure to recognize similar or identical situations that happen elsewhere, maladaptation, threat minimization and environmental shifts, cognitive narrowing and event fixation, centrality of expertise, denial and disre-

> gard of outsiders, lack of corporate responsibility, and focus upon "single loop" or single cause, learning. (p. 18)

Changes of core beliefs, values, and assumptions, improvement in risk recognition capacity, and more effective communication systems can be important post-crisis changes. We believe that organizations that emerge from crisis successfully and capitalize on the opportunities of crisis will be able to avoid these barriers. After a crisis, organizations have the opportunity to emphasize the importance of what they learned from the event. It is also important that the organization illustrate to stakeholders how its learning will help ensure that the organization will not experience a similar crisis in the future.

Effective crisis communication messages should include discussions of organizational learning. Several of the case studies in this book emphasize the importance of learning. Mary Barra described very specific changes at General Motors, including new safety procedures and processes. She also suggested the GM had gone through a cultural change as a consequence of the crisis. Odwalla communicated very specific changes about its food processing by creating a flash pasteurization technique that would keep the nutrients in the juice but remove or at least limit the potential for *E. coli* infections. Jack in the Box communicated about changes through its internal communication channels to ensure that messages from state and federal agencies are received and communicated appropriately. King Car clearly communicated its new testing procedures for ensuring the safety of its powdered milk products following the melamine crisis in China. TVA communicated a number of lessons learned in its post-crisis communication to maintain legitimacy following the ash slide near Knoxville. Beyond learning, organizations must also be ethical in their crisis communication.

Ethical Communication

A second key factor in creating a renewing response is communicating ethically before, during, and after the crisis. As we discussed in Chapter 11 on ethics in crisis communication, we believe that organizations that have not prepared adequately for crisis or are unethical in their business practices must account for those actions in the wake of a crisis. In fact, unethical actions are often the cause of a crisis. One of the key factors in crisis is that it reveals the ethical values of the organization. If an organization is unethical before the crisis, these actions are likely to be identified during the crisis.

Most organizations have mission and value statements, and these can be very useful during a crisis. "Don't be evil" is the motto for Google's corporate code of conduct. The code goes on to emphasize "doing the right thing"—following the law, acting honorably, and treating coworkers with courtesy and respect. Statements such as this can be very useful in guiding an ethical and value-based response to a crisis.

Crises provide the opportunity to identify failures that have built up over time and have been ignored or gone undetected. Organizations that institute strong, positive value positions with key organizational stakeholders, such as openness, honesty, responsibility, accountability, and trustworthiness, before a crisis happens are best able to create renewal following the crisis. General Motors, as we noted earlier, failed to live up to its mission of treating every customer with respect during the ignition recall crisis. Mary Barra acknowledged that failure, and as part of her apology, she promised to learn from the failures. She initiated a number of steps to insure that safety issues would not be ignored in the future. We believe ethical communication involves having positive stakeholder relationships, choosing a forward-looking, provisional response to the crisis, and following the ethical standard of significant choice. What follows is a description of each of these standards as well as representative examples for each.

Positive Stakeholder Relationships

Included in ethical communication are the relationships organizations have with their stakeholders. There are opportunities for the public and stakeholders to develop positive relationships prior to crisis, and we believe these efforts are a strong investment. If organizations are going to benefit from a reservoir of stakeholder goodwill following a crisis, they must invest in equal partnerships with their stakeholders prior to the crisis. Organizations may seek out opportunities to work with stakeholders before a crisis and seek to address their concerns in constructive equitable ways. Sometimes this is described as two-way symmetrical public relations. According to James Grunig, decisions made by organizations should be mutually beneficial to the organization and its audiences. Negotiation should be used to create mutual understanding and build

strong, positive relationships. When strong relationships are developed before a crisis, an organization is able to depend on its stakeholders to help it overcome the negative effects of a crisis.

The case study on Malden Mills provides an example of a leader, Aaron Feuerstein, who had developed strong positive relationships with his stakeholders prior to the fire at his textile manufacturing plant. These relationships served as a reservoir of goodwill and support that helped him through the crisis. The Schwan's case provides an example of how the truck drivers' positive relationships with customers played an important role in the company's recovery. Similarly, King Car was also able to build on its strong positive relationships with suppliers to recall a very high percentage of its contaminated product following the melamine crisis. Without these relationships, an important component of each company's crisis response would have been missing. What follows is a discussion of why crisis communication should emphasize positive organizational values to be effective.

Provisional Rather Than Strategic Communication

Renewal and ethics also focus more on provisional or instinctive responses to crisis rather than on strategic communication. Provisional crisis communication can be described as being grounded in the current conditions and focusing on how we move forward and learn from the crisis. It is most often grounded in an authentic and honest assessment of the crisis and response. Strategic crisis communication is designed to protect the image of the organization by employing spin to deflect blame from the organization. Strategic responses are generally more calculated and designed to achieve specific aims. Usually these involve avoiding, shifting, or limiting blame and responsibility. Renewal is often but not always based on a leader's established character and reputation for ethical conduct. These leaders often respond in provisional or instinctive ways based on their long-established patterns of doing business. Typical of the discourse of renewal is an immediate and instinctive response based on the positive values of the organization and virtues of a leader rather than a strategic response that emphasizes limiting or reflecting responsibility or blame.

Examples such as Milt Cole's response to the fire at his lumber mill exemplify a provisional response. Milt explained in the case study that he knew immediately that he was going to rebuild his lumber mill. He explained that, the night following the fire, he slept like a baby. Aaron Feuerstein, owner of Malden Mills, responded in a similar manner. Alfred Schwan responded to the salmonella outbreak at Schwan's with a personal value statement that set the tone for the organization's crisis response: "If you were a customer of Schwan's, how would you want the company to respond" (D. Jennings, personal communication, January 29, 1996). Clearly, this response was not only consistent with Alfred Schwan's approach to business but also compatible with his personal values as well. What follows is a discussion of how communication can be

assessed as ethical or unethical.

> Opportunity 1
>
> Organizations that base their crisis communication on strong, positive organizational values are more likely to experience renewal.

Significant Choice

As we discussed in our chapter on risk communication, significant choice is an important ethical standard. Nilsen (1974) explains that much of human dignity resides in our capacity to make rational decisions. In order to make rational choices, we must have accurate information. If we are denied access to information, our capacity to be logical and rational is limited. We advocate that a standard of significant choice be used as a criterion for ethical crisis communication. In this case, we advocate always communicating the essential information based on what is known and not known and what is best for the stakeholders. This usually involves openness and transparency and avoiding statements that may be misleading or which overly reassure. We use the notion of significant choice as criteria for evaluating whether post-crisis messages are ethical. Nilsen argues that clear and unbiased communication is needed for citizens to make rational choices and decisions. During a crisis, communication that is unclear or biased can distort decision making and deny stakeholders the opportunity to make rational decisions.

The opportunity to make significant choices is crucial to effective crisis communication. Domino's was thrust into a crisis started over social media and over time created significant choice for its stakeholders about the hoax. TVA failed to communicate effectively about the risk of an ash slide prior to the crisis and hence violated the ethic of significant choice in its pre-crisis communication. Conversely, King Car added to a larger discussion of risk and significant choice by testing their own products for safety and publicly declaring them unsafe in the wake of denials and stonewalling by other companies. Complete and free access of information though communication is essential to effective crisis communication. In addition, this communication should be forward-looking to provide a vision for the future.

> Opportunity 2
>
> Organizations that make significant choice a priority in their crisis communication are more likely to experience renewal.

Prospective Versus Retrospective Vision

Throughout this book, we have suggested that a forward-looking prospective approach to crisis communication can facilitate learning and renewal. Most often, however, organizations are focused on the past, retrospectively trying to explain and justify what happened. A third feature of a renewing response, therefore, is communication focused on the future rather than the past. Organizations that have created renewing responses to crisis typically are more prospective than retrospective in their crisis communication. These organizations focus on how to go forward, organizational learning, optimism, their core values, and rebuilding rather than on issues of blame, responsibility, or fault. Issues of blame and fault seem to be less important in cases of organizational renewal. Organizations focusing on renewal are typically optimistic and building a vision for the future that stakeholders can work together to achieve.

Optimism

The discourse of renewal is inherently an optimistic form of communication and focuses on the ability of the organization to reconstitute itself by capitalizing on the opportunities embedded in a crisis. For instance, Meyers and Holusha (1986) explained that "[c]rises present opportunities as well as challenges, opportunities that are not available at any other time" (p. 45). In their research, they describe seven opportunities associated with crisis: heroes are born, change is accelerated, latent problems are faced, people are changed, new strategies evolve, early warning systems develop, and new competitive edges appear (Meyers & Holusha, 1986). In fact, a number of writers have suggested that crisis has the potential to create important opportunities (Hurst, 1995; Mitroff, 2005; Nathan, 2000b; Witt & Morgan, 2002). With this in mind, we argue that crisis is a turning point for an organization (Fink, 1986). The discourse of renewal takes into account the potential opportunities associated with crisis and focuses on the organization's often reinvigorated sense of purpose and direction after it emerges from a crisis.

Many cases in this book illustrate communication that is optimistic about the future. Milt Cole and Aaron Feuerstein were both optimistic about the futures of their companies and instilled those visions in their stakeholders. The leaders and families of Greensburg, Kansas, were optimistic about their future and the potential opportunity that the tornado provided their town. Mary Barra is optimistic about the future of General Motors. Crisis communication failures like L'Aquila and Flint were much less optimistic and focused more on assigning blame and responsibility for the crisis.

> Opportunity 3
>
> Organizations that focus on moving beyond crises rather than escaping blame are more likely to experience renewal.

Engaging in Effective Organizational Rhetoric

The discourse of renewal is grounded in a larger framework of engaging in effective organizational rhetoric (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007). Cheney and Lair (2005) explain: "Organizational *rhetoric* involves drawing attention to issues and concerns in contemporary organizational life with a focus on issues of persuasion and identification" (p. 75). The discourse of renewal involves leaders structuring a particular perspective or view for organizational stakeholders and publics. Managing a crisis most often involves communicating with stakeholders to construct and maintain specific interpretations of the crisis (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). Establishing renewal involves leaders motivating stakeholders to stay with an organization through a crisis as well as rebuilding it better than it was before. We advocate that organizational leaders who hope to inspire others to imitate and embrace their views of crisis as an opportunity establish themselves as models of optimism and commitment (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007; Ulmer et al., 2009). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) characterize arguments based on models as follows: "In the realm of conduct, particular behavior may serve, not only to establish or illustrate a general rule, but also to incite to an action inspired by it" (p. 362). Conversely, anti-model arguments involve behaviors that the leader believes should be avoided.

An important part of providing engaging and effective organizational rhetoric is telling a story of the crisis that makes sense and that helps the audience interpret the meaning of the crisis. Most of us make sense of things that happen to us within the larger structure of a story. There are characters and plots, lessons and morals, and beginnings and ends. Storytelling—what happened? why? who are the heroes? and importantly, where do we go from here?—is a very big part of making sense of a crisis. Telling a compelling and engaging story of the crisis can help stakeholders work together toward organizational renewal (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). Usually, it is a visible leader, perhaps the CEO or an elected official, who can tell the story of the crisis and answer the important questions about what does this mean and where do we go from here.

Several cases in this book emphasize leaders inspiring and motivating stakeholders to overcome crises. The Greensburg community developed a vision to be the model of an environmentally sound community following its tornado. King Car developed a vision to be the model of the food industry in Asia by testing its products independently from government tests and disclosing publicly the contamination of its products. Schwan's chose to focus on its customers' needs during its salmonella outbreak and become a model for food recalls and crisis responses. Milt Cole and Aaron Feuerstein both serve as models in their industries of placing importance on employees and the human equation in crisis communication. What follows is a summary of the categories of the discourse of renewal and how this theory can be used in crisis communication.

Opportunity 4

Organizations that offer compelling stories and visions for the future can motivate stakeholders to work toward renewal.

Summary of the Discourse of Renewal

The discourse of renewal provides a different perspective on crisis communication than is presently examined in the research on corporate apologia, image repair theory, or situational communication theories discussed in Chapter 2. Rather than protecting or repairing the image of the organization following a crisis, the discourse of renewal emphasizes learning from the crisis, ethical communication, communication that is prospective in nature, and engaging in effective organizational rhetoric. The discourse of renewal focuses on an optimistic, future-oriented vision of moving beyond the crisis rather than focusing on legal liability or responsibility for the crisis. What makes these responses so effective is they mobilize the support of stakeholders and give these groups a vision of the post-crisis future to follow. Crises that emphasize threat to the image of the organization typically lack these qualities and often have the potential to extend the life cycle of the crisis.

We hope that, after reading this book, you will use this theory to better understand how crisis responses are constructed effectively or ineffectively, to determine whether a crisis response was effective or ineffective, and even to develop crisis responses for your organization or circumstance. Our goal is to have those interested in better understanding crisis responses to use the discourse of renewal to evaluate crisis responses based on presence or absence of learning, communication ethics, a prospective vision, and organizational rhetoric. We also see ample opportunity for practitioners to use this theory to develop crisis messages and crisis plans for responding to future potential crises. What follows is a way for practitioners to use the components of the discourse of renewal to plan for crises.

The Discourse of Renewal and Crisis Planning

Preparing for a crisis is important for any organization or community. The discourse of renewal provides an understanding of how organizations and communities can consider developing a crisis plan and more importantly, build their crisis communication skills over time. Learning, the first part of the discourse of renewal, suggests that organizations can learn vicariously from other organizations, or they can learn experientially by going through and hopefully surviving a crisis. Organizations that want to prepare for crises should examine case studies of crises that were managed well as well as ones that failed. This initial form of crisis planning opens discussions about the importance of effective communication about understanding risks and about responding during a crisis. It also creates an understanding of the choices that are necessary during a crisis. One choice will be to determine how the organization will define the crisis—will it be seen as only a threat or will there also be opportunities? Another choice will be to determine what will be the most important communication choices during a crisis. In this case, will the organization emphasize protecting its image, or will it work to communicate openly and honestly? Will it focus on making sure stakeholders are safe, or will it focus on strategically presenting a view of blame and responsibility? By examining cases of crisis response in similar areas or industries, organizations can consider the definitions of crisis, the communication demands associated with the event, and the important questions it will need to answer in its responses.

The second part of any organizations' or communities' crisis response is to determine the values that will guide the response. Determining values—being open and transparent, the values the CDC espouse as being first, right, and credible, or a value statement like the one we saw with Schwan's CEO Alfred Schwan during his company's crisis (How would we want our company to respond to this crisis if we were a customer?)—is essential to an effective crisis response. Organizations should take time to determine the values that will guide their crisis responses and practice through exercises and simulations using those values to respond. Without clear values in place, an organization or community is going to struggle in its crisis communication.

Within the content section of ethics, organizations and communities that are preparing for a crisis should work to build strong positive stakeholder relationships, build their capacity to respond to crises, adopt a standpoint of significant choice, and develop a provisional over a strategic approach to communication practices. Developing clear ethical practices takes time. Organizations seeking to communicate openly and honestly during a crisis need to practice these skills day to day. As we mentioned in Chapter 1 in the section on crisis misconceptions, crises expose the character of organizations; they do not build character. Organizations must prepare for communicating effectively during a crisis by developing their ethical skills each day.

Organizations and communities can work to develop a prospective vision that will help them meet the standards set out in the discourse of renewal. As we mentioned in Chapter 1, another key misconception of effective crisis communication is to focus on the past. We believe that organizations and communities need to build a vision for moving forward. Since this approach is counterintuitive, it is going to take some time to develop these skills and perspectives. During practice sessions, drills, and exercises, it will feel natural to focus exclusively on who is responsible, who we should blame, and why the crisis is not our fault. However, effective crisis planning involves building the communication skills to develop a vision for moving forward and building consensus with stakeholders to achieve that vision.

The final aspect of crisis planning using the discourse of renewal involves engaging in effective organizational rhetoric. In this case, leaders, organizational members, and community members need to build their skills in telling stories of optimism and resilience. Crises are a part of life. Furthermore, as we have extensively discussed in this book, crises actually produce positive results that can improve an organization or community if we embrace this outcome. Through effective communication within and outside the organization, we can begin to change our perspectives about crises and their impact on our lives. Crisis planning then is about developing new mindsets about crisis, building resilience through effective communication practices within and outside the organization, and establishing a sense of optimism in responding to crisis cases and simulations.

The discourse of renewal also suggests a process approach to crisis planning. This process approach involves changing mindsets about crises, building communication skills through practice and vicarious learning, establishing the ethical character and communication practices of the organization through discussions and everyday applications, and resisting our misconceptions of crisis. The goal is to build the skills of organizational members over time, so that regardless of the type of crisis, the organization and its members will be able to adapt and meet the challenges and opportunities that the crisis presents (Ulmer & Pyle, 2016).

Summary

As we've seen, organizational crises are traumatic events that threaten the existence of organizations, but these events also provide opportunities. When dealing with crises, it is important to recognize an organization has the opportunity for renewal, depending on how it has prepared before the crisis and how it communicates during and following it. For an effective response, organizations would do well to communicate learning, maintain ethical communication, and have a prospective vision and sound organizational communication practices throughout the crisis.

The ultimate goal of this book is to help you view crises differently. We hope you now view crises as not entirely negative events but rather know there is potential for opportunity and renewal inherent to these events. By first examining the lessons of managing uncertainty, effective crisis communication, and leadership, we established some guideposts for better understanding and managing the challenges of crisis communication.

Communication choices have an impact on the outcome of a crisis. In addition, we hope you have expanded your understanding of crisis communication and that you have developed some of your crisis communication skills. As you see risks developing into crises in your organizations, we challenge you to continue to apply the lessons discussed in this book to those cases. In this way, you can continue to build your own skills and find ways to see the opportunities inherent to crisis.

Finally, we hope that you will be able to identify the inherent opportunities in crisis through learning from your failures and clarifying your organizational values and risk estimates. Organizations that are going to be successful in managing crisis must be able to communicate effectively before the crisis, see the opportunities inherent in these events, and learn to make the appropriate changes or adjustments so that the event does not happen again. We believe that organizations that follow this advice are likely to emerge from a crisis stronger, more resilient, and with a renewed spirit and purpose.

> Opportunity 1: Organizations that base their crisis communication on strong positive organizational values are more likely to experience renewal.
> Opportunity 2: Organizations that make significant choice a priority in their crisis communication are more likely to experience renewal.
> Opportunity 3: Organizations that focus on moving beyond crises rather than escaping blame are more likely to experience renewal.
> Opportunity 4: Organizations that offer compelling stories and visions for the future can motivate stakeholders to work toward renewal.

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Index

ABC News, 60–61
Academic disciplines, crisis theory and, 17, 18 (table)
Accountability, 87, 88, 173–174, 175–176
    See also Responsibility
ACLU. *See* American Civil Liberties Union
Agenda setting, 20
Ailes, Roger, 3
Ambiguity, 78–81, 81 (table)
    See also Uncertainty
Ambivalent stakeholder relationships, 36
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), 102
American Meat Institute, 61
American Red Cross, 178
Amnesty International, 78
Anagnos, G., 152, 153
Anthony, K. E., 167
Anthrax, 83
Apologia, corporate, 23
Apologies, 70, 95, 114–115
Audiences. *See* Stakeholders
Authoritarian leadership style, 118, 119

Bangladesh, clothing factories, 171
Barra, Mary, 94–98, 114, 119, 180, 186, 189
Baylor University, 3
Bazerman, M. H., 152, 153
Beef Products Incorporated (BPI), 22, 60–63
Belief structures, 82–83
Benoit, W. L., 24
Bernays, Edward, 36
Bhopal (India), 78, 155–156, 177
Biotechnology debate, 159–160, 161
Bioterror, 154–155
Blackfish, 146–147
Blame, 15, 20, 80–81, 122, 174, 176
    See also Responsibility
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), 165
BPI. *See* Beef Products Incorporated
BP oil spill, 6, 49–53, 116, 172–173, 174

Brancheau, Dawn, 145–146, 147
BSE. *See* Bovine spongiform encephalopathy
Burke, James, 113
Burns, J. M., 119
Business scholarship, 17
Button, Gregory, 86
Byron, Kristal, 138

Cantor Fitzgerald, 179–180
Care, ethic of, 178–179
Case studies, 49
    See also Leadership cases; *and specific cases*
Catholic Church, child sexual abuse scandal, 117, 171, 172, 173
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
    crisis communication, 3, 31, 83, 121
    salmonella outbreaks, 125, 126, 127, 132–133
    social media use, 45
    water contamination cases, 137
CEOs. *See* Leadership
Certainty, 40–41
    See also Uncertainty
Challenger space shuttle, 151
Charitable giving, 178
Cheney, G., 189
Chernobyl nuclear power plant, 77–78
China, melamine food crisis, 98–101
Climate change, 166, 167–168
Clinton, Bill, 55
Coast Guard, 50–53
Cole, Milt, 129–131, 180, 187, 189, 190
Cole Hardwood fire, 129–132, 180, 187
Columbia space shuttle, 151
Compassion, 39, 95
Competing value view, 174–175
Consumer safety. *See* Food-borne illnesses; Product recalls
Contingency leadership, 118–119
Convergence theory, 166–168, 168 (figure)
Coombs, W. T., 24–25
Coorey, Paul, 54
Corporate apologia, 23
Corporations as moral agents, 173–174, 176, 179, 186
Cosmology episodes, 83
Courtright, J. L., 23

Crises
causes, 39, 80
characteristics, 5–6
definition, 5–7, 7 (table)
intentional, 8–10
misconceptions, 12–13, 13 (table)
as opportunities, 4, 13, 25, 27–28, 47–48, 183–184, 189
preventing, 46
types, 8–11, 25
unintentional, 10–11
Crisis communication
before crises, 43
goals, 31–32
inclusive perspective, 27–28
misconceptions, 12–15, 13 (table)
post-crisis, 44–45
provisional, 187–188
skills, 3–4, 39
strategic, 187
theories, 22–27, 24 (table)
See also Lessons for crisis communications
Crisis leadership. *See* Leadership
Crisis planning, 14, 191–192
Cultural sensitivity, 36
Culture-centered communication, 37

Dao, David, 141–142
De Bernardinis, Bernardo, 91–92
Deepwater Horizon. *See* BP oil spill
Democratic leadership style, 118, 119
Department of Homeland Security (DHS), 3, 42, 50
Desmond, Tim, 145
Developing countries, unsafe working conditions, 171
DHS. *See* Department of Homeland Security
Dietz, Bob, 40–41
Disasters. *See* Environmental disasters; Natural disasters; Terrorism
Discourse of Renewal
crisis planning and, 191–192
distinction from other approaches, 27
ethical values, 26, 184, 186–188
leadership, 115–116, 190
opportunities, 188, 189, 193
organizational learning, 25–26, 184, 185–186

organizational rhetoric, 26, 184, 189–190
overview, 190–191
prospective vision, 26, 184, 188–189
provisional crisis communication, 187–188
stakeholders and, 26
theory, 25–26, 184 (table), 184–190
Disease outbreaks
avian flu, 40–41
as crises, 10–11
Ebola virus, 21, 33, 162
media and, 32–33
swine flu (H1N1), 10, 175
tracking on Internet, 45
See also Food-borne illnesses
Disney Co., 160
Domino's Pizza, 68–72, 188
Dow Chemical, 78
Dow Corning, 80
Doyle, Patrick, 70
Drinking water. *See* Water supply contamination
Duncan, Thomas Eric, 162

Earthquakes
in Japan, 106
at L'Aquila, 14, 90–94
responses, 174–175
See also Natural disasters
Ebola virus, 21, 33, 162
E. coli outbreaks, 57–60, 80, 186
Economic downturns, 11, 12
Elliott, D., 185
Emergencies, 8
Emotional responses, 22, 38
Empathy, 39, 95, 114
Employee relations
at Cole Hardwood, 129–131, 180
at Malden Mills, 54–55, 180, 187–188
organizational memory and, 155–157
poor, 9
unsafe working conditions, 171
Enron, ethical values, 13, 171, 174
Environmental disasters
BP oil spill, 6, 49–53, 116, 172–173, 174

Exxon *Valdez* oil spill, 75, 78, 116, 122, 170, 171, 176, 177
Kingston ash slide, 85–90, 186
Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), 87, 102, 103, 137
Epistemological uncertainty, 74, 83
Ethical issues
access to information, 176–177, 188
ambiguity, 79
challenges, 173
corporations as moral agents, 173–174, 176, 179, 186
in crises, 26, 171–173, 174–175
humanistic care, 178–179
opportunities, 176, 177, 178–179, 181
unethical leadership, 10
virtues, 120, 122, 180
See also Responsibility
Ethical values
competing, 174–175
in crises, 175–181
definition, 174
in Discourse of Renewal, 26, 184, 186–188
judgments based on, 172–173
of leaders, 10, 120, 122, 129, 180
of organizations, 13, 26, 179–181, 186, 191
Ethics, definition, 172
Evidence, ambiguous, 80
Exemplification theory, 22–23
Exxon *Valdez* oil spill, 75, 78, 116, 122, 170, 171, 176, 177

Facebook. *See* Social media
Failures
intelligent, 154
learning through, 152–155
as opportunities, 154–155, 156–158
of organizational memory, 155–157
vicarious learning from, 154–155
Fantasy messages, 169–170
FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), 152
FDA. *See* Food and Drug Administration
Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), 3, 64, 102, 122, 137
See also Witt, James Lee
FedEx, 6
Feinberg, Kenneth, 95
FEMA. *See* Federal Emergency Management Agency

Feuerstein, Aaron, 53–56, 74, 120, 122, 179, 180, 187–188, 189, 190
Financial crisis (2008), 14, 117
Firestone, 116–117
Fishman, D. A., 20
Flint (Michigan), water contamination crisis, 38, 102–106, 172, 175, 178
Floods, North Dakota, 42, 83, 157
    See also Natural disasters
Focusing event theory, 20–21
Food and Drug Administration (FDA), 98, 126–127, 152
Food-borne illnesses
    E. coli, 57–60, 80, 186
    Jack in the Box case, 80, 186
    mad cow disease, 165
    Maple Leaf Foods case, 114–115
    Odwalla case, 57–60, 186
    Peanut Corporation of America case, 125–129
    salmonellosis, 11, 125–127, 132–136
    Schwan's case, 11, 132–136, 187, 188
Food products
    country of origin labeling, 177
    genetically altered organisms, 159–160, 162–163
    lean finely textured beef, 22, 60–63
    melamine crisis, 98–101, 186, 187
Ford Motor Company, 80, 116–117
Fox News, 3
Framing theory, 18–19, 47
Freedom Industries, 136–141
Freimuth, Vicki, 83
Fukushima Daiichi accident, 106–109, 171–172

Garment industry, 171
General Motors (GM)
    bankruptcy, 11, 116
    Barra's leadership, 114, 115, 119, 186
    defective ignition switches, 42, 94–98, 171, 180
Getchell, M. C., 138
Giuliani, Gioacchino, 91–92
Giuliani, Rudy, 76, 122
Global environment, 12
GM. *See* General Motors
Goals of crisis response, 31–32
Good Samaritan parable, 178
Goodwill, 35, 43, 113, 114, 123, 180, 187

Google, 186
Greensburg (Kansas) tornado recovery, 64–68, 189, 190
Grunig, James, 187

Hammonds, Kristy, 68–69
Hanna-Attisha, Mona, 102
Hayward, Tony, 6, 116
Health. *See* Disease outbreaks; Food-borne illnesses; Public health
Hearit, K. M., 23
Heath, R. L., 34, 166
Hedrick, Darren, 64, 66
Hermann, C. F., 5
Hewitt, Steve, 64, 65
High reliability organizations, 163
Hoaxes, 68–72
Holladay, S. J., 19
Holusha, J., 47, 189
Honesty, 95, 113, 114, 115, 120, 122
Hostile takeovers, 9–10
Huber, G. P., 157
Humanism, 178–179
Hurricane Katrina, 36, 122

Iacocca, Lee, 122
Image repair theory, 23, 24, 176
Images, 15, 24
Impression management, 24
India. *See* Bhopal
Industrial accidents, 78
    See also Bhopal; Nuclear power plant accidents
Institute for Crisis Management, 10
Intelligent failures, 154
Intent, questions of, 80
Intentional crises, 8–10
International Food Information Council, 159

Jack in the Box, 80, 186
Japan, Fukushima Daiichi accident, 106–109, 171–172
Jennings, D., 133, 134
Johanns, Mike, 165
Johnson & Johnson, 113, 115–116, 152–153, 179, 183–184
Joplin (Missouri) tornado, 21
Jordan, Thomas, 91

Kennedy, John F., 21–22
Kessler, David, 79
Kilgore, Tom, 85–86, 88
King Car, 98–101, 186, 187, 188, 190
Kingston Fossil Plant, 85–90
Kramer, M. W., 73

Lachlan, K. A., 21
Lair, D. J., 189
Laissez faire leadership style, 118
Lampe, John, 116–117
Langer, E. J., 162
L'Aquila (Italy) earthquake, 14, 90–94
Lay, Kenneth, 171
Leadership
    building networks, 114–115, 121–122
    contingency approach, 118–119
    definitions, 111–112
    honesty, 95, 113, 114, 115, 122
    importance, 111, 115
    ineffective, 116–117
    learning from crises, 122
    lessons for crisis communications, 112–122
    openness, 95, 114, 115, 121–122
    optimism, 189
    renewal and, 115–116, 190
    spokesperson role, 113, 120–121
    styles, 118, 119
    theories, 118–120
    transformational, 119–120
    uncertainty and, 120–122
    unethical, 10
    virtues, 120, 122, 129, 180
    visibility, 112–114
Leadership cases
    Cole Hardwood, 129–132
    Freedom Industries, 136–141
    Peanut Corporation of America, 125–129
    Schwan's Sales Enterprises, 132–136
    Seaworld, 145–148
    United Airlines, 141–145
Lead in drinking water. *See* Water supply contamination
Lean finely textured beef (LFTB), 22, 60–63

Learning, vicarious, 154–155
    See also Organizational learning
Lee (King Car chairman), 98–99
Leiss, W., 165
Lessons for crisis communications
    communicating with stakeholders, 38–45
    diverse audiences, 33–34
    goals, 31–32
    leadership, 112–122
    listening, 37–38
    positive effects of crises, 47–48
    reducing uncertainty, 43–45
    self-protection messages, 42
    stakeholder partnerships, 32–33
    stakeholder relations, 34–36
    timing, 38, 40
    uncertainty, 40–41, 42, 74–84
    underrepresented groups and, 36–37
LFTB. *See* Lean finely textured beef
Lin, Y., 99
Listening to stakeholders, 37–38
Lutnick, Howard, 179–180

Machiavelli, Niccolo, 118
Mad cow disease, 165
Malden Mills plant fire, 53–56, 74, 120, 179, 180, 187–188
Maple Leaf Foods, 114–115, 116
Mathematics, 17
McCain, Michael, 114–115, 116
McIntyre, J. J., 21
McIntyre, Tim, 70
McKenna Long & Aldridge (MLA), 87–88
MDEQ. *See* Michigan Department of Environmental Quality
Meat. *See* Food-borne illnesses; Lean finely textured beef
Media
    agenda setting, 20
    dealing with, 113–114, 120–121
    local, 32–33
    news diffusion, 21
    partnerships with, 18
    refusing comment, 15, 44, 121
    roles, 18
    training for dealing with, 121

withholding information from, 177
See also Social media
Media theories, 18–22, 19–20 (table)
Meyers, G. C., 47, 189
Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), 102, 103
Millner, A. G., 127, 167
Mindfulness, risk identification and, 162–163, 163 (table)
Minnesota Department of Health, 133
Minority groups, 36
Misinformation, 169
Mitroff, I. I., 152, 153
Mittelstaedt, R. E., 154, 156
MLA. *See* McKenna Long & Aldridge
Monsanto, 162–163
Morality. *See* Ethical issues
Munoz, Oscar, 141–142, 143–144

NAMI. *See* North American Meat Institute
NASA, 151
Nassar, Jack, 116–117
Nathan, M., 27
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), 94
National Nurses United, 162
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 49
National Research Council (NRC), 160, 164
Natural disasters
assistance for victims, 178–179
as crises, 5, 8
earthquake responses, 174–175
Hurricane Katrina, 36, 122
L'Aquila earthquake, 14, 90–94
media preparation, 21
North Dakota floods, 42, 83, 157
recent, 3
risk management, 10
social media roles, 21
tornadoes, 21, 64–68
tsunamis, 106, 178
Negative stakeholder relationships, 35–36
Nestle, 100
News diffusion theory, 21–22
News framing theory, 18–19
News media. *See* Media

Newtown (Connecticut), Sandy Hook shootings, 20, 112
New Zealand, foot and mouth disease scare, 154–155
NHTSA. *See* National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
Nike, 155
Nilsen, T. R., 168–169, 188
NOAA. *See* National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
Nonexistent stakeholder relationships, 36
Non-leadership style, 118
Normalcy, 20–21
North American Meat Institute (NAMI), 61, 62
North Dakota floods, 42, 83, 157
Northouse, P., 111–112
Novak, J. M., 156
NRC. *See* National Research Council
Nuclear power plant accidents
    Chernobyl, 77–78
    Fukushima Daiichi, 106–109, 171–172

Obama, Barack, 112, 137
Odwalla, Inc., 57–60, 186
Oil spills
    BP Deepwater Horizon, 6, 49–53, 116, 172–173, 174
    Exxon *Valdez*, 75, 78, 116, 122, 170, 171, 176, 177
Olbrechts-Tyteca, L., 166–167, 190
Ontological uncertainty, 74, 83
Opportunities
    crises as, 4, 13, 25, 27–28, 47–48, 183–184, 189
    Discourse of Renewal, 188, 189, 193
    ethical issues, 176, 177, 178–179, 181
    failures as, 154–155, 156–158
    risk communication, 161, 163, 166, 170
    uncertainty as, 77
Optimism, 189
O'Reilly, Bill, 3
Organizational learning
    barriers, 185
    behavioral, 185
    Discourse of Renewal, 25–26, 184, 185–186
    from failures, 152–155, 186
    leadership roles, 122
    levels, 185
    paradigmatic, 185
    systemic, 185

unearning, 157–158
Organizational memory, 155–157
Organizational renewal. *See* Discourse of Renewal
Organizational rhetoric, 26, 184, 189–190
Organizational theories, 23–26, 24 (table)

Palenchar, M. J., 166
Panic, 41–42
Partnerships with stakeholders, 32–33, 35 (table)
Pauchant, T. C., 185
Peanut Corporation of America (PCA), 125–129
Perelman, C., 166–167, 190
Perrow, C., 11, 12, 170
Physics, 17
Pink slime. *See* Lean finely textured beef
Pinto case, 80
PIOs. *See* Public information officers
Political science, 17
Population Institute, 159
Positive stakeholder relationships, 35, 44
Predictable surprises, 152, 153
Privacy laws, 32–33
Product failures and defects, 11, 80
See also General Motors
Product recalls, 11, 95, 98–101, 114–115
See also Food-borne illnesses
Product tampering. *See* Tylenol tampering case
Provisional crisis communication, 187–188
Proxy communicators, 127
PRSA. *See* Public Relations Society of America
Psychological theories, 17
Public health
industrial accidents and, 78
radiation exposure, 77–78, 106–109, 171–172
water contamination, 102–106, 136–139, 172
See also Disease outbreaks; Food-borne illnesses
Public health departments, 32–33, 78
Public information officers (PIOs), 50–53
Public meetings, 37–38
Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), 174
Pyle, A., 50

Ramo, J. C., 17

Rawl, Lawrence, 75, 116, 122
Reagan, Ronald, 21–22
Recessions, 11, 12
Red Cross, 178
Red River floods, 42, 83, 157
Reierson, J. L., 58
Renewal. *See* Discourse of Renewal
Reputations, 15, 22–23, 25, 173, 180
Reservoir of goodwill, 43, 114, 123, 180, 187
Response times, short, 6, 76–77
Responsibility
    accepting, 95, 176
    of leaders, 122
    questions of, 80–81, 174, 175–176
    See also Accountability; Blame
Reynolds, B., 17, 41, 42, 160
Risk
    crisis and, 8
    identifying, 162–163
    mindfulness of, 162–163
Risk communication
    audiences, 164, 167
    convergence theory, 166–168, 168 (figure)
    definition, 160
    dialogue-centered approach, 164, 165–166, 166 (table)
    distinction from crisis communication, 160–161, 161 (table)
    fantasy messages, 169–170
    importance, 40
    misinformation, 169
    opportunities, 161, 163, 166, 170
    significant choice, 168–170, 176–177, 188
    technology-centered approach, 164–166, 166 (table)
Risk management, 9, 10
Ritter, Michael, 89
Rowan, K. E., 165–166

Sabotage, 9
Safe Kids Worldwide, 11
Salmonellosis, 11, 125–127, 132–136
Sandman, P., 40–41, 164–165
Sandy Hook shootings, 20, 112
Sanlu, 98
Schmidt, Levi, 66

Schwan, Alfred, 133, 188, 191
Schwan's Sales Enterprises, 11, 132–136, 187, 188, 190
Seaworld Parks & Entertainment, 145–148
Seeger, M. W., 18, 160
Self-efficacy, 15, 42
Sellnow, T. L., 127, 156, 167
September 11 attacks, 47, 74, 76, 83, 179–180
Setzer, Michael, 68–69
Sherman, A., 45, 46
Shinawatra, Thaksin, 41
Significant choice, 168–170, 176–177, 188
Simon, L., 185
Simulations, 82
Sitkin, S. B., 154, 185
Situational crisis communication theory, 23, 24–25
Snyder, Rick, 102, 103
Social media
    effective uses, 45–46, 70, 114, 138
    hoaxes, 68–72
    monitoring, 45–46, 70
    news diffusion role, 21, 22
Social responsibility, 174
    See also Ethical issues
Sociological theories, 17
Southern, Gary, 137
Space shuttles, 151
Spence, P. R., 21, 22, 23
Spin, 15, 37, 44
Stakeholders
    belief structures, 82–83
    communicating with, 26, 34–36, 38–45
    diversity, 33–34, 36–37
    interests, 14
    listening to, 37–38
    overreassuring, 41
    partnerships with, 32–33, 35 (table)
    primary, 34
    relations with, 14–15, 32–33, 34–36, 35 (table), 43, 187
    risk communication and, 164, 168–169
    secondary, 34
    uncertainty and, 77–78
    values, 179
Steltenpohl, Greg, 57

Stelter, Brian, 21
Stonewalling, 15, 39, 44
Storytelling, 190
Stracener, M., 46
Strategic crisis communication, 187
Strikes, 9
Sun Tzu, 118
Surprise, 5–6, 7
Sutcliffe, K. M., 163
Swine flu (H1N1), 10, 175

Taiwanese Department of Health, 98, 99
Takata air bags, 3
Taleb, N. N., 74
Technical interactions, 11
Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), 85–90, 186, 188
Terrorism
  biological, 154–155
  as crisis cause, 9
  9/11 attacks, 47, 74, 76, 83, 179–180
  simulations, 82
Threat bias, 27–28, 183
Threats, 6, 75
Tobacco industry, 79
Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), 106–109
Tompkins, P. K., 151
Tornadoes
  Greensburg, 64–68, 189, 190
  Joplin, 21
  See also Natural disasters
Training, 82
Transformational leadership, 119–120
TVA. *See* Tennessee Valley Authority
Twitter. *See* Social media
Tylenol tampering case, 113, 115–116, 152–153, 179, 183–184

Uncertainty
  acknowledging, 40–41
  belief structures and, 82–83
  communication ambiguity, 42, 78–81
  crisis-induced, 73–74
  definition, 73–74
  epistemological, 74, 83

impact on stakeholders, 77–78
key issues, 82 (table)
leadership roles, 120–122
managing, 73, 85, 120
nonroutine crisis events, 74–75
ontological, 74, 83
as opportunity, 77
organizational breakdowns, 82
reducing, 43–45
short response times and, 76–77
threat perception and, 75
unexpected crises, 74
Unintentional crises, 10–11
Union Carbide, 78, 155–156, 177
United Airlines, 141–145
United States Coast Guard, 50–53
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 117
United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), 50, 61, 80, 98, 165
Unlearning, 157–158
Unpredictable surprises, 152–153
USDA. *See* United States Department of Agriculture

Values. *See* Ethical values
Veil, S. R., 127
Vicarious learning, 154–155
Violence, workplace, 9
Virginia Tech University, 102, 103
Virtues, 120, 122, 180
Volkswagen, 3, 117

Wallach, Danny, 65
Walters, Lee Anne, 103
Walton, Andrew, 138
Water supply contamination
in Flint, 102–106, 172
in West Virginia, 136–139
Watkins, M. D., 152, 153
Weick, K. E., 78, 82, 83, 163
West Virginia American Water Company., 136–141
WHO. *See* World Health Organization
Winfrey, Oprah, 165
Winterkorn, Martin, 117
Witt, James Lee, 17, 39, 44, 115

Wood, R. S., 20
Workplace violence, 9
World Health Organization (WHO), 40–41, 162

Y2K computer problem, 75
YouTube, 68–72
    See also Social media

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Table of Contents

Half Title	2
Title Page	3
Copyright Page	4
Brief Contents	6
Detailed Contents	7
Preface	13
Acknowledgments	15
Part I The Conceptual Foundation	19
1 Defining Crisis Communication	20
2 Understanding Crisis Communication Theory and Practice	40
Part II The Lessons and Practical Application	60
3 Lessons on Effective Crisis Communication	61
4 Applying the Lessons to Produce Effective Crisis Communication	92
5 Lessons on Managing Crisis Uncertainty Effectively	133
6 Applying the Lessons for Managing Crisis Uncertainty Effectively	151
7 Lessons on Effective Crisis Leadership	198
8 Applying the Lessons for Developing Effective Crisis Leadership	219
Part III The Opportunities	262
9 Learning Through Failure	263
10 Risk Communication	275
11 Responding to the Ethical Demands of Crisis	295
12 Facilitating Renewal Through Effective Crisis Communication	313
References	329
Index	354
About the Authors	371